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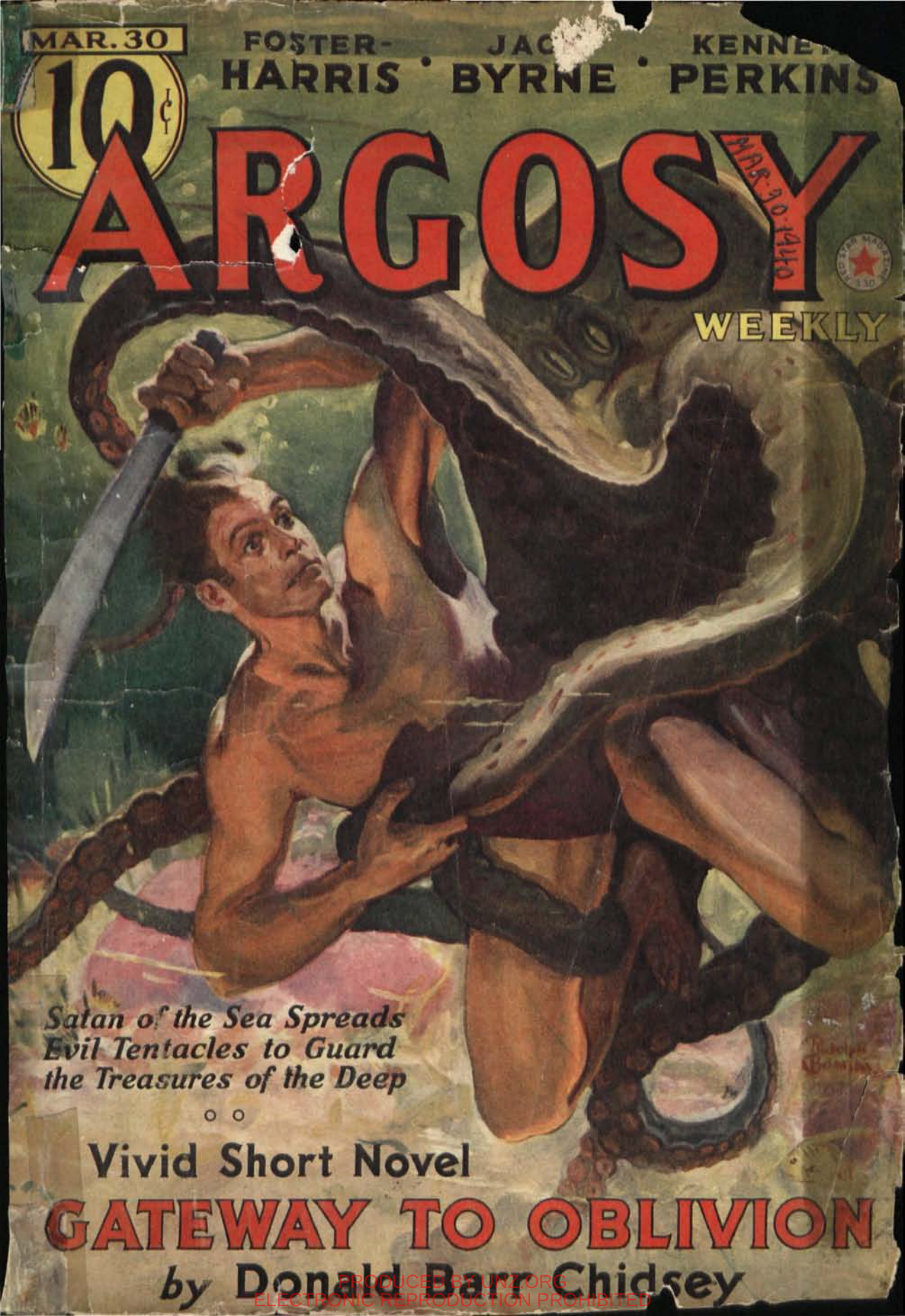

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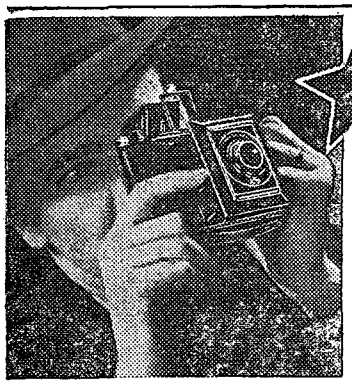

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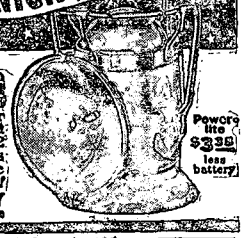

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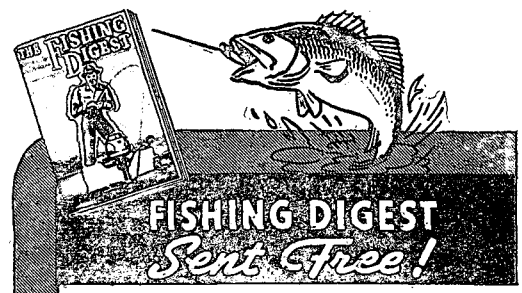

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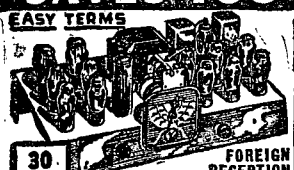

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America's Oldest and Best All-Fiction Magazine

Volume 298 CONTENTS FOR MARCH 30, 1940 Number 1

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Cover by Rudolph Belarski
Illustrating The Sea Ghost

This magazine is on sale every Wednesday

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28x5.50-18	3.35	1.40
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.45
6.00-17	3.40	1.40
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.40
31x6.00-19	3.40	1.45
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Gateway to Oblivion

By DONALD BARR CHIDSEY

Author of "Calamity River," "Flaming Acres," etc.

Complete Short Novel

CHAPTER I

CHÂTEAU OF ECHOES

THE taxi driver had a beard. Fowler Clark paid him, told him not to wait, and sauntered through a break in the ragged hedge.

"Château" is a word which thuds upon the American ears, suggesting battlements, towers, shooting slits innumerable, possibly even a donjon; and some châteaus are like that; but not Soulignac.

As Fowler approached, it appeared no more than a large dilapidated farmhouse. Drenched in sunlight though it was, it frightened him a little. It reeked of past grandeur: it should have been fenced off and made visible to tourists only after payment of a fee.

With all this, there was something eerie about it. It was not all dead. Something there, whether ghostly or human, clung to life, touching Soulig-

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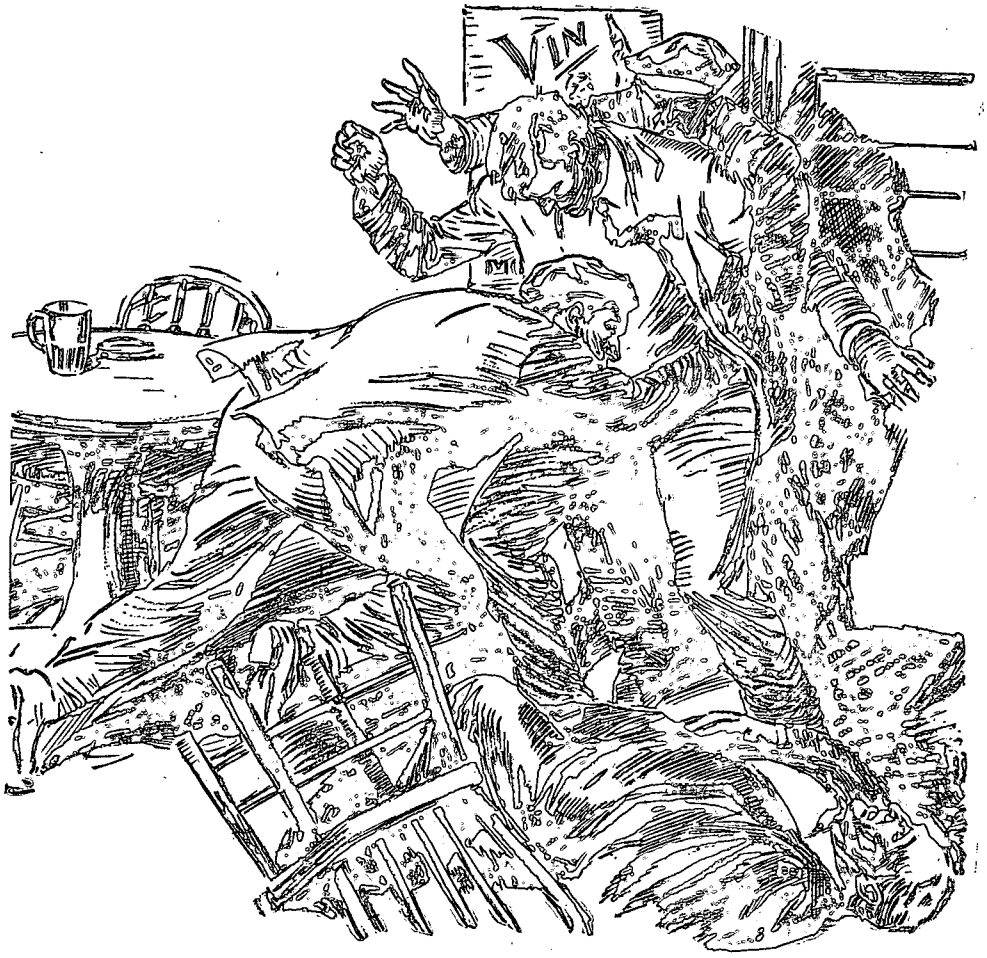

Welcome to Marseille! Tonight you will meet the waterfront shadows face to face, and feel the sinister caress of an Apache garrote; and you may yet see the white glory of a gypsy's jewel

nac in many places, leering from windows, though never truly seen, preventing Soulignac from being a mere ruin, combining the picturesque with the terrible.

On his right and left after Fowler had passed through the gate there were fountains, chipped, broken, long since dry; and what had been a formal garden was now scarcely more than a jungle through which a path had been somewhat haphazardly sickled. Yet as he got closer he saw that here and there spaces had been cleared. There was a rose garden. There was a cabbage patch which somehow managed to seem dignified.

People lived there. The half-cracked Comte de Soulignac, known to be near the end of his resources; his daughter; an old servant. What was more important to Fowler Clark, who after all

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was a business man, not a romancer, was the fact that the *Gypsy's* in all probability was there also.

The *comte* owned the *Gypsy's,* and except for this château, mortgaged to the hilt, it was just about all he still did own. The *comte* had, a few days before, communicated with the firm which employed Fowler, suggesting that a representative be sent to confer with him but insisting that this conference be kept a secret; and the firm, not unaccustomed to such requests, had sent Fowler Clark, that young American who, once a lapidary, was now one of the greatest living authorities on fine diamonds.

For the firm had guessed what it was the *comte* wished to talk about. To be sure of this, as a check before going to the south of France, Fowler had stopped in Paris and visited again the museum where the *Gypsy's,* a loan from the Comte de Soulignac, was ordinarily on display. The *Gypsy's* was not there.

An assistant curator had informed Fowler that it was in the hands of a jeweler "for cleaning," and Fowler without a grin had bowed, thanked him and departed.

Of course the museum was pledged to secrecy too. De Soulignac would not wish anybody to know that he hoped to raise money on the *Gypsy's.* He planned, surely, to lend the *Gypsy's* to the museum again after he had used this money and made more money with it—as he hoped.

That this was the reason for Fowler's visit was as certain as the fact that as he walked up the sad path, his heart was pumping with excitement.

For he was about to behold with his own eyes and fondle with his own two hands a diamond which had belonged to sundry kings and queens and cutthroats but never to a legitimate dealer. Fowler had seen the *Gypsy's,* of course, but only through glass. Now he was to hold it and gravely set a price. A price for the *Gypsy's!* The thought seemed a sacrilege.

HE FOUND no bell-pull or knocker, so he rapped on a front door which stood wearily ajar as if its hinges were afflicted not only with rust but rheumatism. Echoes wandered here and there, now loud and confident, now tentative, seeming to test remote walls and ceilings. These echoes were his only answer.

On either side the moat had been filled in, and there was a flower garden, carefully kept but fighting a losing battle against encroaching weeds. Bees droned heavily, and the sun was hot.

He knocked again. Echoes.

Well, he was a business man, and he hadn't come all the way to this remote place for nothing. There must be somebody home. He walked around the château, staring at windows which were blank, boarded up. He found a side door, but it was locked. He found a kitchen door.

This stood wide open, and he knocked vigorously on it and called out. There was no answer.

The kitchen was large, stone-flagged, immaculate, and copper pots and pans of the sort you couldn't buy nowadays for love or money were hung upon its walls. In the middle of a floor so clean that it almost glittered was a pool about four inches across of some reddish fluid which was turning dark brown as it dried.

Fowler stared at this, absently at first, then with increasing interest. When still he got no answer he stalked into the kitchen. He knelt beside the pool, dipped a forefinger into it,

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sniffed the tip of that forefinger. Though there was a film of brown over the stuff, undeniably it was red underneath. It looked like blood. It smelled like blood.

He straightened, frowning. Of course the answer was that the cook, whoever she was, had recently killed a chicken or goose. Yet when he went outside he saw no signs of poultry or pigs or any other animals.

His time was valuable. He did not wish to return to Marseille in an ancient jerky railway coach which stopped every half mile, only to come back in the same manner the next day. Possibly the servant had gone to the village on an errand and the *comte* and his daughter had fallen asleep in the heat of the afternoon.

He went back into the kitchen, crossed it—it seemed acres—and whistling as he went, walked along a dim corridor at the end of which was a huge room with even less light.

As he stepped into this room two arms entwined his waist from behind, pinning his own arms to his sides, while something silken and slippery slithered around his neck.

HE STARTED to yell, but the thing around his neck was tightened, choking off sound. His eyes grew hot and he felt them bugging out. His ears heard only a thundrous roar. All the world rocked and faded.

He had just strength enough to kick backward, and luck enough to strike what must have been a shin. There was a squeal of pain, and the arms relaxed. His elbows, freed, pistoned backward, one after the other, and he squirmed to the left.

Something slid across his left wrist, burning him, but the pressure on his neck was relaxed. Then he was running back down the corridor, across that enormous kitchen, out into the court.

There he wheeled suddenly and stared at the sunlit château. Nothing stirred, and there was no sound save the drone of bees.

Two possibilities he considered. Either the old *comte* had gone completely insane and attacked him as an intruder, or else a crime of violence had been committed and the criminals, still in the château, had tried to kill a possible witness against them.

The former seemed unlikely. No pair of weaklings had tussled with him just now. The *comte,* though not young, might conceivably possess the strength of a madman, but it was improbable that either of the other two occupants of the Château Soulignac—an aged female servant and a convent-bred girl of twenty or so—would assist him in any such murderous attack.

It was then, standing in the dazzling sunlight of the court, holding a handkerchief against the knife cut in his wrist, that Fowler Clark made a very foolish decision.

He decided to go away and say nothing about this. He would return to Marseille and watch the newspapers and set his course by their story. He argued with himself that to report to the police would mean a long and elaborate investigation, a great loss of time for himself, and inevitably, since he was well known as a diamond expert, publicity over the fact that the Comte de Soulignac contemplated selling or pawning the *Gypsy's.* Wouldn't this be a violation of the firm's promise that his visit to Château Soulignac be kept secret?

He was to regret this decision; but at the time, perhaps because he was bruised, dizzy and a little frightened, it seemed the best thing to do.

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He did not return by the way he had come. Instead, he went down a lane, a sort of back road, no more than two half-obliterated wheelruts, which led off the court to the north, tending in the general direction of the main highway.

Repeatedly he looked back. He had a feeling that he was being watched.

On the highway he turned north. Soon he would come to another village, another tiny railway station. Now and then he passed a trudging peasant, but none of them gave him a *bonjour* or even a glance.

It was true that an investigation would reveal the visit to Château Soulignac of a young Englishman or American, equally true that the bearded taxi driver might be able to identify him if he were found. But what reason did he have to think that he would be found? Who, from the scanty description furnished by a chauffeur, could find him in the great sprawling cosmopolitan city of Marseille? He walked on.

He was lucky about the train. He had only a few minutes to wait, and the drowsy station master paid him no heed. Also, he found a second-class compartment for himself. He threw himself into the seat, exhaling with relief, and when the rickety old train had started to puff onward he leaned elbows upon the windowsill for a last faraway glimpse of Château Soulignac.

As he did so he heard even above the labored chuffing of the locomotive a sharp *ping* near at hand, and something tore a clump of splinters out of the side of the window not two inches from his left cheek. The glass over a handsome hotel advertisement behind him tinkled to the floor. Something skittered across another such advertisement, only cracking the glass, not shattering it. Something went *clunk* into the opposite wall.

Fowler sat back as the train picked up what no doubt its engineer considered speed. Somebody was throwing stones at him? Why should anybody do that? He had seen no children.

He found the hole where the missile had come to rest after glancing off the framed advertisements. Stones don't make holes in wood. With the aid of his penknife and a long thumbnail he prised the thing out. No, it wasn't a stone. It was a bullet.

"I wonder," he mused, as he stared at the small, twisted, leaden object, "I wonder what it's all got to do with the *Gypsy's.*"

CHAPTER II

GYPSY'S GEM

HE WAS still wondering this as he sat in La Veuve Joyeuse that night, not listening to the American swing band and not paying much attention to the dancers.

The dancers wore very little, and when they were not dancing they sat at the various tables with the various suckers and sipped what was sold as champagne. Also there was a jumping-jack of a gigolo, tiny and with an unvarying expression of droll astonishment, who doubled as master of ceremonies. La Veuve Joyeuse, though small, was very hot indeed.

He had returned to his hotel in the Canebière, a badly worried young man. He knew already that he had done wrong, but he believed it was too late to turn back. A little later, going out for dinner, he had seen a man start away from the hotel after him, and a little after that, in a restaurant, he had seen this same man slip behind a nearby table.

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An inconspicuous man this was, with nothing of the sleuth about his appearance, and he never looked directly at Fowler. Nevertheless, when the meal was finished and Fowler had strolled some distance to an unlikely café for coffee, and when again he saw this man seat himself a short distance away—then he became definitely frightened.

Since he was in the business of buying and selling diamonds, Fowler knew something of the ways of continental detectives, and he knew that members of the Paris Sûreté at least—nor was there any reason to suppose that those of Marseille would be otherwise—were circuitous and subtle in their methods but appallingly exact. There was about them nothing of the bulldog directness of Scotland Yard or Centre Street, compared with which they seemed downright gentle, almost apologetic; yet they knew what they were doing, and they were swift, they were also smart.

Fowler had felt extremely uncomfortable. He had seldom glanced, and then only in the most casual way, at this rather shabby, rather absent-minded looking little man.

"I must do exactly what a young American with a free night in Marseille would be expected to do," he had told himself. "I must either go slumming in the Vieux Port or else make a round of the night clubs."

The Old Port section of Marseille is certainly one of the toughest in the world, and to go there alone and in evening clothes would approximate suicide. Which is the reason why Fowler sat in La Veuve Joyeuse. You might call it the instinct of protective coloration.

The jumping-jack bounded to the center of the floor and began to sing with more enthusiasm than skill.

To this, as to the rest of the show, Fowler Clark paid no heed, for he was thinking of the *Gypsy's*.

IT WAS born in violence, at least as far as history is concerned. Where it came from nobody knew. Somewhere in the Orient, no doubt, for diamonds had not then been discovered in Brazil and South Africa.

What his fellow inmates in the Marshalsea, London, in the year 1598, had against the gypsy, is not a matter of record either. Nor is it known what the authorities had against that anonymous wanderer, except that he was a gypsy and so, the laws against vagabonds being what they were, liable to be arrested and clapped into jail any time a constable, sheriff or Queen's marshal didn't happen to have anything else to do.

At any rate, his fellow prisoners leaped upon him one afternoon and beat him to death, which would have passed as a trifling matter had not a badly sewn wound in the upper part of the victim's leg broken open as he fell. There tumbled out of this agonizing but tolerably effective hiding place and onto the damp, dark stones the loveliest diamond anybody had ever seen.

It lay there, gleaming in serene self-assurance, water-white, flawless, striking dumb for perhaps a full minute that panting bloody-fisted clump of purse snatchers, hookers, rufflers, palliards, fraters, whipjacks, thieves, imbeciles and common ordinary everyday rogues. Yes, for a full minute, probably, nobody spoke.

Then the jailers came, having heard sounds of brawling, and survivors of what followed vowed that they didn't know why they did what they did unless it was because the sight of that

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brilliant had made them mad—an altogether reasonable hypothesis. At any rate, somebody grabbed the diamond, and as one man they rushed the gate.

One jailer was killed, together with two of the prisoners, and there were put-out eyes and broken jaws too numerous to mention. Three other prisoners escaped, the foremost of them clutching the diamond.

All three were recaptured in very short order, but in the excitement the first unfortunately was beaten to death. The stone was not in either of his hands; it was not upon his person.

They went back over the route of flight, searching carefully, and found it at last in what at that time, when sanitary plumbing was unknown, took the place of a sewer. There it lay, serene as ever, utterly an aristocrat, imbedded in filth but blazing as bravely as though it rested on velvet.

Now since nobody knew who the gypsy had been, or how he had come by this marvelous gem, there was some question about the ownership of what became known as the *Gypsy's*—not the Gypsy's Diamond, merely the *Gypsy's*. And when that sort of confusion occurred in those days, one thing inevitably happened. The Queen got it.

She was a parsimonious old termagant, was Elizabeth, with her red hair, her black teeth, her freckles, but in matters of personal adornment she knew no moderation. She was simply crazy about jewelry.

She got the diamond; and she wore it from time to time for the rest of her life, and to this day you can see the *Gypsy's* figuring prominently in the lowest V-point of her breathlessly low gowns as depicted in many a portrait.

And so the *Gypsy's* became part of the English crown jewels, and remained so for somewhat less than a century, when James II, unable to raise money from a Protestant parliament, sold the gaud to Louis XIV of France. The purchase price was a trifle over one hundred and twenty thousand pounds sterling, though it would not be accurate to consider this the actual value of the stone, since Louis was notoriously backing James and the money was in fact no more than a bribe, the *Gypsy's* being only a sensational cloak for same.

When the French revolutionists, before taking his head, took all his jewels from Louis XVI, the Sun King's weak descendant, the *Gpysy's* disappeared. It was found some years later clutched in the fist of a man whose dead body floated in the Seine. Identified—there was no difficulty about this—the diamond was handed over to Napoleon Bonaparte, who had just made himself emperor. Napoleon planned to have it mounted in the hilt of his favorite dress-occasions sword, but meanwhile, being hard up for funds, he pledged the *Gypsy's,* along with sundry lesser stones, as collateral for a loan raised by a member of the house of Rothschild. The Rothschild fell in love with the *Gypsy's* and held on to it, taking it to Vienna.

But it didn't stay there.

A subsequent Rothschild in the 1860's got himself into trouble which could not have been financial—whatever it was, it was hushed up—and was rescued therefrom by the head of the then rich family of de Soulignac. In gratitude he permitted de Soulignac to buy the *Gypsy's* for a purely nominal price, something around fifty thousand dollars. That nobleman's impoverished grandson, too proud to sell it and unable to afford to safeguard it, had lent the jewel to the Musée des Pierres Précieuses in Paris.

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CHAPTER III

THE SAD GASCON

THE jazz band blared, the suckers giggled, while the jumping-jack of a gigolo waved his arms and rolled his ever-amazed eyes, and somebody tapped Fowler Clark's elbow.

"*Monsieur* is interested in diamonds perhaps?"

He turned to face the inconspicuous little man who had followed him from the hotel.

Gascon was written in every feature of this man's face, but he was no D'Artagnan. He looked unhappy, discouraged, small, weak. He had a thin droopy black mustache. He kept his eyes cast down and spoke in a voice so low as to be almost a whisper.

He must have entered the place and taken a seat next to Fowler with catlike quietness. Fowler had known nothing of another man's presence until he felt that tap, yet now he saw that the bartender and a chisel-faced man who seemed to be the manager were anxiously conferring, their glances on the newcomer.

The gigolo, when he saw Fowler's companion, faltered in his song. He swallowed hastily, grinned broader than ever, and continued; but under his make-up he had paled, and his voice was no longer steady. A waiter sidled away, rolling his eyes toward Fowler's table.

Even the dancing girls who until now had chittered like so many jackdaws, when they saw the sad-faced man beside Fowler fell silent, their eyes getting very big.

The man seemed unembarrassed and indeed unaware of all this tension. His eyes were cast down in monk-like humility.

"Diamonds?" Fowler resisted an impulse to take a long drink of the champagne before him: that might indicate nervousness. "Why, yes. Diamonds are my business."

"Yes. You are Monsieur Fowler Clark."

"Absolutely."

"Forgive me for coming to you like this, *monsieur,* but I have heard that you are a very skillful lapidary."

"I used to be." There would be no profit in lying. This man probably knew all about him anyway. "But I haven't made a stone—that is, cut one—or polished one, in years. I'm in the buying end of the game now."

"Yes. . . Yes. . ." The little man gazed at the ashtray as though it disheartened him. "Yet I have something I think *monsieur* might be interested in."

Fowler relaxed, even gave a little inward laugh of relief. It was all right now. This man was no cop.

Fowler had been handling diamonds long enough to have experience with crooks of many kinds, with smugglers, thieves, receivers, kleptomaniacs, go-betweens, agents provocateurs. When you deal daily with a commodity of which a hundred thousand dollars worth can be crammed into a watch pocket, you may be sure that the underworld will not permit you to wait for temptation to come: the underworld will bring that temptation to you, not once, not twice, but all the time.

Fowler was inured to whisperers. He was used to dishonest propositions put forward in the guise of private business deals. He knew the shifty look, the corner-of-the-mouth suggestion. So now he breathed easily and let his nerves settle into place, sure that this man at his side was just another crook.

"If you're going to suggest that I

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buy, you've come to the wrong party," he said coldly. "I have no side business of my own, and the company I work for only deals with recognized brokers."

The man shook his head cautiously, as though he thought it might come unscrewed. He pursed his lips.

"No, I was not going to propose that, *monsieur*. I was going to ask *monsieur* if he would not repolish a stone for me."

Fowler's eyebrows rose. This was a little as if somebody had asked Henry Ford to fix a flat tire.

"I told you I hadn't made or polished a stone in years. Anyway, why come to me? Aren't there any lapidaries in Marseille?"

"None that I would trust with this job, *monsieur*."

Fowler shrugged, and took a sip of wine. "If it's so fine a piece of close goods why don't you take it to Amsterdam?"

"I have my reasons, *monsieur*."

FOWLER was troubled. Surely no petty peddlers of stolen goods would cause such consternation in a place like La Veuve Joyeuse. For though the music and dancing continued, and the pace if anything had been stepped up a trifle, still the management was worried. The barman, the waiters, the bouncer, were not at ease. They kept glancing surreptitiously at Fowler's table; and there was fear in their eyes.

"It is no ordinary diamond," the little man went on in that same low apologetic voice. "It is not, for instance—if *monsieur* will forgive me—it is not such a diamond as *monsieur* wears."

Fowler glanced at his ring, nodding thoughtfully.

"Yes, this isn't much of a rock. But it happens to mean a lot to me. My father gave it to me when I graduated from high school."

He was remembering the occasion. How his father had said to him then: "It's off-color, Fowler. I wish I could afford to give you a better one." The old man had cleared his throat. "But it's a diamond, and after all a diamond's the hardest thing in the world.

"You can't kill a diamond with anything else but another diamond. I thought it might—well, I thought it might be a sort of symbol, to remind you—" And the old man, embarrassed, had let it go at that; but Fowler had understood.

The low voice, a thin whine strung through it, continued.

"If *monsieur* would reconsider—"

"How the hell did you know who I was, anyway?"

"I used to work in Amsterdam, for Bottche Brothers. You were polishing then. Oh, you wouldn't remember me," he said hastily, as Fowler turned. "I was an insignificant laborer, and I didn't stay long. But I remembered you."

"I see. Well anyway, I'm not interested."

"I would be willing to pay a large sum—"

"Please go," snarled Fowler. Thinking of his father had made him suddenly sick of this whole business, of the music and noise, of the sneakiness of the man at his side. "You're spoiling my evening."

"It would be better if *monsieur* reconsidered. I am Jules Maîtrejean, and my brother is—"

"I wouldn't care if you were Adolph Hitler! Get out!"

The little man shrugged slowly, and rose. Presently Fowler saw him getting

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his hat from an awed attendant. He went out.

Fowler acted on an impulse, something he seldom did. There was something damned funny about this business. He was going to follow that man. He paid for his wine and started for the door.

"I wouldn't do it, *monsieur,*" the attendant whispered as he handed Fowler his hat.

"Wouldn't do what?"

"Follow that man. He is Jules Maîtrejean, the brother of—"

"Go to hell!"

"Yes, *monsieur.*"

The doorman, looking frightened, opened the door but did not go outside to whistle a taxi. And in fact, as Fowler learned, there were no taxis in sight. Which was curious.

There was one car, a touring car, directly in front of La Veuve Joyeuse, with a driver slouched at the wheel, his head turned away.

"This makes it much easier. If *monsieur* will step in—"

Jules Maîtrejean had lost none of his apologetic air, yet now he was giving a command. Appearing out of a shadow, he was himself like another shadow. Fowler Clark turned his head right and left. There were two men behind him, two impassive erect Frenchmen: he could not see their faces, which were shaded, but in the glare of the night club's sign he caught a glint of the pistols they held.

"Oh," he muttered. "American gangster stuff, eh?"

"We have learned many things from America," Maîtrejean said politely. "Please step into the car, *monsieur.* Somebody might come."

Fowler was sore, and being sore he was reckless. "Step into it yourself! I'm going to call a—"

IT HAPPENED very quickly. His elbows were grabbed from behind, and he was fairly lifted off his feet, gasping at the strength of these two men. He never had a chance to struggle.

Before he could catch his breath he was seated in the back of the touring car and around his neck had been thrown a white silk scarf which one of the men held from behind. The men did not show their guns now but kept them in pockets, their hands over them. Maîtrejean had slipped into the seat beside the driver, and the car started.

"It would be best not to resist, *monsieur,*" Maîtrejean murmured. "You must understand that you could very swiftly and easily be strangled."

Fowler did understand this, and was silent. Too astonished to be sore any longer, he sat upright, arms free, legs free, yet as helpless as though trussed and gagged. The man who held the scarf, white against the white of Fowler's neck and collar, had an arm half-thrown across Fowler's shoulders. Anybody who saw them, and hundreds could have seen them, would suppose them the best of friends.

They turned south into the Canebière, passed the Bourse, came to the Vieux Port.

Here was a big city, here were busy streets, taxis, vehicles of every description, traffic police, pedestrians. And here was a man being kidnapped right through the middle of it—and not a head was turned in suspicion. A very neat piece of work.

"I see that my name means nothing to you," Maîtrejean said as they thumped over the cobbles of the Quai des Belges. "My brother, *monsieur,* is Georges Maîtrejean, who is called *Le Souriant,* the Smiler. He is the—how should I say it?—the boss. The Al Capone."

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"I see," said Fowler.

He kept his voice low. The men beside him were watching him, and the scarf was firm around his throat, allowing him just room enough to swallow.

"Of Marseille."

"I see. You have them here too, eh?"

"We have many things in Marseille, *monsieur*. We are not so far behind the times as you Americans seem to believe."

They turned left into the Quai du Port. On one side were cafés and shops, sailors of every nation, soldiers, pickpockets, *gendarmes*, toughs. On the other side, the Old Port, a mere basin much too small for modern ships, was cluttered with fishing craft that rocked absently, their rigging and matchstick masts so slim and quaint that they seem no more than toys on a sheet of glass on the nursery floor.

Ahead, the vast steel network towers of the bridge-ferry, which carried automobiles back and forth across the basin as though on an immense suspended tray, were grotesquely modern: it was as though an eighteenth century mariner had pulled on a pair of plus fours. Beyond the crazy roofs of the Quai de Rive Neuve, the Rue Sainte, the Boulevard de la Corderie, towering high on her hill, gilt in the moonlight, the statue of Notre Dame de la Garde patiently faced the sea.

They turned right, and to the accompaniment of a great squawking of horns and cursing of drivers gradually butted their way through traffic and entered a side street.

Suddenly it was silent. The turbulence of the Quai du Port was shut off as abruptly as though a soundproof door had been slammed. It was dark now, too. They were in another world.

There was no sidewalk in this ancient thoroughfare, which was so narrow that the fenders almost scraped the buildings on right and left, and there was very little stir of life. Sometimes a dim wineshop, sometimes a leering face at a window.

They crawled, twisting through streets that were no more than alleys, doubling, backing, but never sounding the horn. Once at a seemingly impossible corner they were obliged to go so slowly that a drunken Apache leaned against the door and cursed them for taking up so much room.

One of Fowler's captors, without a word, with no expression, slapped the man's face with the flat of a pistol. The Apache staggered back, spitting blood. He crouched. He drew a knife.

Then Maîtrejean leaned out of the car, so that his face could be seen. The Apache was thunderstruck, cringing.

"Forgive me! I did not know—"

"We will continue," said Maîtrejean.

THE turns made might have been for the purpose of confusing him, or perhaps they were necessary because certain thoroughfares were so very narrow that no automobile could use them. At any rate, when they drew up in front of Aux Pauvres Diables it was Fowler's conviction that they were still somewhere just back of the Quai du Port.

The rumble of traffic was audible, though muffled: it crept gingerly down into this dark region, as daylight might reach with timidity into the awful depths of a well.

Aux Pauvres Diables from the street was no more than a sign. There was an open doorway, but the only light came from a street lamp forty or fifty feet away. Two men who had been leaning against the wall scurried away at sight of Maîtrejean, looking fearfully back over their shoulders.

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"We will go downstairs," said Maîtrejean.

He led the way, and Fowler, poked by the impassive gunmen, followed him, and the gunmen followed Fowler.

It was a narrow stairway, winding and steep, all stone, and except for the fact that the walls were whitewashed it might have led into the chill of some medieval dungeon. It was undeniably picturesque, and as undeniably disquieting. The stones reeked of sin and violence, and the fanshaped steps led from a drizzle of light mercilessly down into blackness. The buildings in this part of the city, like the vices, were very old.

At last a little light sprinkled over Maîtrejean's shoulders. Another turn —and they stepped into a lowceiled and unexpectedly large chamber. There was sawdust on the floor, a small zinc bar in one corner, a door behind the bar, several bare tables, a few chairs, benches all around the walls.

Properly the place should have been illuminated only by candles thrust into bottles, or even by the pitch-spluttering cressets of the Middle Ages, yet it boasted three electric bulbs, dirty and wan.

Another false touch was on the shelves behind the bar, which instead of holding cobwebbed puncheons and tankards of tin and leather, supported an array of up-to-date brandies, wines and cordials—exceptionally clean bottles, Fowler noticed, and some of them very expensive. Behind the bar also, his forearms resting on it, while his chin rested on his forearms, was a sullen, short and very fat man with an enormous mustache.

"Here," announced Maîtrejean, "we will meet my brother Georges—the Smiler."

"I think I'll forego that honor," Fowler Clark said, and side-stepped, half turning, and punched one of the men in the ear.

This time he did not act on impulse but as a result of careful reasoning. After the strain of bringing him here —and for all Maîtrejean's easy air it must have been a strain—they would relax; they were at home. The silken scarf no longer encircled his neck, for the descent had been too steep and the footing too precarious to permit this. The gunmen would be afraid to open fire, afraid of shooting one another.

To be sure, even if he reached the street he would find himself in the middle of the Maîtrejean district. He would be lost in a maze of dark streets and at any turn might be set upon by thugs. But it would be better than waiting to see what happened here.

CHAPTER IV

THE SMILER

THE man he had punched staggered sideways, shouting something, and reached for his pocket. The other gunman stepped directly in front of the doorway. He had drawn his pistol but he clubbed it.

Feet spread wide, Fowler sprang in, stooping very low. He hooked a right to the man's body. But he didn't stoop low enough, for the butt of the pistol caught the top of his head. It did not hurt, but it stunned. He rocked on his heels, shaking his head. Then he felt the silken caress of one of those scarves.

It was Jules Maîtrejean. But this time, despite his dizziness, Fowler was ready. He had learned the trick. He lurched head and shoulders backward, pulling down his chin. He spun on his heel and lunged with a long left at Maîtrejean.

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It missed—and the gunman in the doorway sprang upon Fowler's back. The other gunman had risen by this time and was edging in, his mouth working, his eyes queerly dark with hate.

As Fowler had anticipated, they were afraid to shoot. But though they might not know much about boxing, they were no strangers to tussles such as this. There was a brisk minute and a half, and at one time Fowler was actually on his knees. As he rose he butted Maîtrejean's stomach with his head, and Maîtrejean went *oonck!* and was out of the fight.

A foot heavily shod caught Fowler's left shin. Pain seared him. But he kept upright, stepping away from the next kick, then quickly stepping in again. He got a full free swing this time, and the kicker tumbled without a sound.

The third man was still on his knees. Fowler found himself facing the bartender, who had raised his right hand. There was a gleam of steel.

Fowler whirled, raced for the doorway.

There he stopped. On the lowest step, perfectly calm, stood a large and rather fat man with a broad persistent smile. For all the difference in size and facial expression, his resemblance to Jules Maîtrejean was unmistakable. In each hand he held a large black Browning automatic.

What was more, Fowler knew instantly that this man would not hesitate to shoot. His eyes said so. His thumbs said so. He wouldn't care if he was heard, nor even if he hit the wrong man.

"You are in a hurry, *monsieur?*"

"I see now," Fowler replied, "why they call you the Smiler."

At this remark the smile broadened. It was in itself merely fatuous, that smile, though vivid enough, what with the bright red lips, the trig black mustache and the teeth all white and even. But the eyes above that smile made it a horrible thing. Physiologists tell us that there are no perfectly black eyes, but surely Georges Maîtrejean's showed black as he stood on the lowest step at Aux Pauvres Diables and faced Fowler—as black as the guns he held.

For the rest, he was straight and firm, despite his fat, dressed somewhat flamboyantly, and at the moment very well pleased with himself.

"So you have heard of me?"

"Only through your brother here. You're not as famous as you think you are."

There was a step behind Fowler, a quick intake of breath. But the Smiler shook his head, and the gunman fell back.

The Smiler waved toward a chair.

"Sit down. Have a glass of wine. I take it that you are Monsieur Fowler Clark of New York and Amsterdam?"

He spoke in French, though now and then he inserted an English word tentatively as if uncertain how it would sound. Jules Maîtrejean had used only English.

FOWLER sat. The Smiler sat opposite at the broad table and placed the automatics in front of him, barrels parallel, butts facing out. However much Jules Maîtrejean might amount to on his own hook, it was clear who was the boss at Aux Pauvres Diables. The others did not even approach the table, and the barman fairly squirmed in obsequiousness.

"Château-Neuf du Pape, Jacques. *Monsieur* likes the wine of the Rhone valley?"

"Very much."

"Ah . . . But first I must have de-

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monstrated to you how foolish you were in trying to quit us. Jacques! In the back of *monsieur's* chair!"

The barman, behind the bar again to get wine, raised his right hand, and once more Fowler caught a flash of steel. Something went *clunk!* and he saw a knife sticking out of the side of his chair's back about an inch from his right shoulder. The chair was sideways to the bar, perhaps twenty-five feet away, and its back was not more than a quarter of an inch thick.

"Excellent, Jacques. Now just under that—"

Another knife, precisely an inch below the first.

"—and now just above."

A third knife. They might have been placed there with the aid of a ruler.

The Smiler nodded sleepy approval.

"Very good. Now the wine." He addressed Fowler. "You see, we are very modern about some things but about other things we are old-fashioned. We think a knife is better in close quarters because it is so quiet. But of course," he glanced at the Brownings, "we will use other weapons if the need arises."

They said nothing more until they had been served, but the Smiler smiled indefatigably on. Fowler was a bit jittery, less because of the display of hardware than because of that pauseless melodramatic beam. That man was so smoothly sure of himself.

The wine, however, was the best of its kind Fowler had ever tasted.

"My brother has told you," the Smiler resumed at last, "that we wish you to repolish a diamond for us?"

"You've gone to a lot of trouble for one stone!"

"It is a very good stone, *monsieur.*"

"And why pick on me?"

"For two reasons. One reason is because my brother tells me that you have extraordinary skill as a lapidary. The other reason I will tell you later, if necessary."

"Aren't there any lapidaries in Marseille?"

"Not good ones. There was one, his name was Martin. But I am afraid he was dishonest. He stole from his employers and was obliged to seek refuge from justice, and like so many fugitives in Marseille he came to me.

"I not only concealed him, but I employed him. Very often I have such work—jewels to be recut or reset, so that they will not afterward be recognized. And Martin did this very well—until a little while ago. Then he tried to sneak away with some of my gems." The Smiler shrugged. "But we still have all of his equipment, *monsieur.* You will be given everything you want for your labor."

"What happened to Martin?"

The Smiler glanced at his watch, then at his brother.

"Open the Squealers' Gate, Jules."

JULES MAITREJEAN went to an iron plate Fowler had not previously noted. It was about two feet square and the same color as the wall of which it formed a part. There were hinges on the bottom, a clamp on the top. Maîtrejean opened it.

"I don't get the idea," said Fowler.

He saw nothing but a square of blackness, though he heard a slow monotonous sucking sound.

"Our back door," the Smiler explained. "Sometimes there is a man who enters Aux Pauvres Diables and we do not wish him to be seen departing—for though the *gandarmes* are afraid to raid us they often keep watch outside."

He tapped the floor. "We are here partly above and partly below the level

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of the water in the Old Port. The Squealers' Gate opens upon a forgotten sewer which leads directly underneath the building backing into this and likewise directly underneath the street, to the seawall.

"The tide is low now, so that no water enters. But when the tide rises it sweeps in here and sucks away everything. Everything."

The smile became if possible even broader.

"You see, *monsieur,* as I pointed out before, though we are modern in some respects we are very old-fashioned in others. Besides, we have civic pride. This is in the Marseille tradition, you comprehend? And all the while the *gendarmes* watch outside."

He rose.

"Let us go to the workshop and examine this diamond. Jules, you will explain to *monsieur* what is to be done."

"The stone," said Jules Maîtrejean, "is now a round double-cut brilliant. Thirty-three facets. We wish it to be made into something like the Cullinan IV, step-cutting the culet and doubling the main facets of the pavilion."

Fowler was stalling for time. He was eager to see this diamond, but he was reluctant to go any deeper into a maze of which he guessed Aux Pauvres Diables was no more than the front, the foyer.

"That's a lot of work," he said.

"There is plenty of time, *monsieur.*"

"It would make the stone easier to sell—it's a more fashionable cut—but it would reduce the weight."

"There would still be much left over."

"Say, how big is this stone?"

"In its present form," answered Jules Maîtrejean, "seventy-one and three thirty-seconds carats."

"What!"

"I told you," the Smiler interposed, gently reproving, "that it was very valuable."

"But seventy-one and—Why, that must be—"

"It is. *Monsieur* has guessed it. Now let us go upstairs."

There was a scraping of feet, a gasping and panting, a sound of ripping clothes. Followed by a disheveled Apache, there burst into the room a small, gray-haired, thin-mouthed man, accompanied by a girl of such startling loveliness that she would have created excitement anywhere. In the dingy precincts of Aux Pauvres Diables she looked as the *Gypsy's* must have looked when they plucked it out of that sewer in the year 1596.

The gray-haired man had small straight eyes, a back stiffened by arrogance. He wore an opera cloak, leaned on a walking stick. Yet there was nothing theatrical about him. He glared at the Smiler.

"From your simper I take it that you are Georges Maîtrejean?"

The Smiler bowed. "I am honored, *monsieur.* And you?"

"I am the Comte de Soulignac."

CHAPTER V

'WARE THE KNIFE

FOR a long time the only sound was the wheezy breathing of Jacques, who suffered from asthma and leaned on the bar with his mouth open. Fowler, the gunmen, the frantic Apache who had tried to keep these visitors out, went unheeded. Jules Maîtrejean, from a corner, surveyed the scene sadly, yet his eyes were watchful.

The girl, obviously Mademoiselle de Soulignac, stood just behind her father, an earnest hand of restraint on

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his elbow. The *comte's* hawk nose was a trifle screwed-up, as if he did not like the odor in this room. He took two forward menacing steps.

The Smiler expanded. He glowed. He scintillated. He was like an actor who has hoped all his life to play in just such a scene. His great moment had come, and out of sheer nervous exaltation he bowed again, lower than before. Had he worn a hat he probably would have swept it off. He was having a wonderful time.

Yet this man was dangerous, as Fowler, watching him sideways, knew. For all his playacting, he was no fool.

The *comte* gave him no chance to make the speech he was doubtless formulating. For the *comte,* seething with rage, was a stranger to prudence. His head might be in the lion's mouth, but all the same he would tell the lion what to do. His was the habit of command.

"Friends who know about these things," he began abruptly, "have told me that it was undoubtedly you or some of your men who decoyed my daughter and me with a message, broke into my château, killed my servant, and stole the *Gypsy's.*"

The Smiler's eyebrows rose. "*Monsieur le Comte* can prove this?"

"No."

"Ah!"

"I have no need of proof. You recognized me just now, and you were not surprised to see me. That is proof enough."

"Not for a court of law, *monsieur.*"

"Damn courts of law! I want the *Gypsy's* back! You bobbing dog, don't you realize that I have promised to return it at the end of three months? I have given my word!"

"And the *gendarmes, monsieur?* Do they agree with you?"

"I have not gone to the *gendarmes.* About the murder, yes. But for reasons of my own I have not reported the theft of the *Gypsy's.*"

Deeper and deeper into that lion's mouth he was thrusting his head. The man was not sane, surely. His daughter tried to turn him back, whispering anxiously to him, but he shook her off.

"Then the *gendarmes* do not know that you are here, *monsieur?*"

"Why should they? I want you to give me that diamond back. We'll take up the matter with the *gendarmes* later."

Somebody snickered. Jules Maîtrejean sidled a little nearer the door. Jacques took his arms off the bar and quietly reached for something out of sight. The Smiler bowed yet again.

"*Monsieur le Comte* overestimates my generosity. It may be—"

The girl stepped forward. She was slim, almost fragile, but straight and unflinching. She carried her head high.

"I have tried to persuade my father that this is not the best of places for a conference. Perhaps if we could go elsewhere—"

"*Mademoiselle,* this place suits me perfectly!"

"What he said about not informing the *gendarmes* that we would come here, was of course not true." But she was a poor liar. "I think that now we should leave this place. Later, perhaps, we can—"

"But I beg you to remain, *mademoiselle!*"

THE *comte* had no patience with all this talk. He was the grand seigneur whose vassals were being inexcusably uppish. It was an impertinence that the *Gypsy's* was not handed over to him immediately. Who the devil were these *canaille* that they should

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withhold it after he had made known that his word of honor depended upon its recovery? The word of a de Soulignac!

"Be silent, Jeanne. It is bad enough that one of us should be obliged to talk to these gutter dogs."

He walked closer to the Smiler. The ferrule of his cane clicked on the flags.

"Enough of this! The stone—immediately!"

His voice was harsh, his manner arrogant. And the Smiler, himself accustomed to obedience and the fawning attention of underlings, did not like it. There were sharp lights in those hard black eyes.

"*Monsieur le Comte* is perhaps precipitant. If he would—"

"Name of a pig! Hand over that diamond without any more whimpering or I'll lay this stick across your shoulders!"

He meant it, too. But you don't talk to a Gascon that way.

The blood of wrath pounded in Georges Maîtrejean's face so that it was almost purple. But he held himself in. He glanced at the Apache, who without a sound turned and went upstairs—no doubt to clear the street lest a passerby should hear something. Jules Maîtrejean moved slowly toward the center of the room, and the gunmen followed him.

What happened then, happened so swiftly that it was not until afterward that Fowler Clark was able to piece it together. He himself started forward with outstretched hand. "See here, suppose we all—"

The girl likewise began to say something. The Smiler ceased to smile, a change as disconcerting as the turning-out of an electric light. He closed lips over those beautiful white teeth and deliberately spat in the *comte's* face.

The Comte de Soulignac screeched, raising his stick. The Smiler drew the Browning automatics, and holding these not by the butts but flat, one in each palm, he struck the *comte* once on the left side of the head, once on the right.

The blows made a horrid *clack,* as though thin wood were splitting. The nobleman, small and feeble, swayed like a helpless thing, and his arms fell to his sides, his eyes went glassy. The Smiler hit him again, *clack!* He crashed to his knees. Then Jules Maîtrejean and the gunmen jumped upon him from behind, clubbed pistols in their hands.

Mademoiselle de Soulignac screamed. The Smiler, smiling again, pleased with himself, put a hand on her shoulder and shoved her so that she staggered back and slammed against a wall. She collapsed.

Behind the bar Jacques waited, knife raised.

Fowler after the first paralyzing shock had plunged into the middle of things. He hauled off one gunman, spun him around, punched him solidly on the point of the chin so that he fell against Jules Maîtrejean. Fowler turned to the second gunman.

Then something that seemed soft was pressed against the back of Fowler's neck. It didn't hurt, he hardly felt it, and he was dumb-founded to find himself on hands and knees.

He was beside the *comte,* and that the *comte* was dead could not be questioned. Likely enough the thin aristocratic skull had been cracked by one of the blows the Smiler had struck, and in the split-second before Fowler reached them the other three men had administered a terrible beating to what was probably already a corpse.

Somehow Fowler reached his feet. He snatched the *comte's* cane, and

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turned in time to meet another attack from the Smiler.

He had no chance, and knew it. No matter which way he turned, at least one of them would be behind him. But he was fight-drunk now and cared nothing for the consequences.

He raised the cane—and dropped it when fire streaked down his arm. Jacques, who had not previously dared to throw the knife, had been given his opportunity in that upraised arm.

The Smiler, chuckling, came in with both pistols swinging. He supposed Fowler to be petrified by pain, as indeed Fowler very nearly was. Only the sight of that hated face caused Fowler to find somewhere a last remnant of strength.

He still had a left arm—and a left fist. He lifted that fist from somewhere near the floor. He felt knuckles plop against a sweat-spongy face.

He remembered very little of what followed. He was on his knees, then flat on his face. He squirmed. He tried to cover his head with his left arm; he couldn't feel the right one at all. Consciousness quit him, not spectacularly, not in a blaze of mind's-eye fireworks, but gradually and even softly, with a feeling like that of sinking into a well earned sleep.

CHAPTER VI

HERE'S THE GAUD

THE return to this world was no such pleasant process. He felt, as soon as he could feel anything at all, like hell. His head ached. His right arm ached. His heart thumped uncertainly, sending great churnings of blood to remote parts of his sore body; and he wished it wouldn't.

When he sat up, which he did reluctantly, he found that he was on a cot in a small and narrow room with a low ceiling. There was no window, no skylight. The door was ajar.

He was amazed to find that his right arm was bandaged and that crisscross pieces of sticking plaster had been put over the cuts on his head. His shoes had been taken off and were on the floor. His dress collar and tie had been removed. On a chair within reach was a bottle of cognac and a glass of water.

He drank, marveling at these signs of solicitude. It wasn't until he saw the workbench on the other side of the room that he understood.

A carborundum wheel like a miniature grindstone. A thin bronze disk about four inches in diameter with an edge grooved to receive diamond dust. Three or four bruting sticks. A skeep, or polishing wheel. A dop, a small metal tulip-shaped cup on a long stem. Tongs. A bottle of olive oil. Tins of emery and other abrasives. Boxes of bort and carbonado.

On the floor was a small dynamo, and overhead was a rod with wheels of various sizes attached, and thin leather straps.

The lapidary's tools and equipment have changed very little since the days of Louis de Bequem—not at all, except for the addition of electric power, in the past one hundred years. These articles were universal, international, as familiar to Fowler Clark as they had been to the late M. Martin, who assuredly had worked here. For they were relatively unimportant to the expert polisher of gems. What counted was the eye, the nerveless hands.

Fowler got up. He had heard the sound of sobbing. He went out through the door.

At the end of a dim corridor stood one of the gunmen. His hands were in his pockets. His lips were puffed where

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Fowler's fist had smacked them; but though he glared at Fowler he did not stir. Beyond him was a flight of stairs leading down.

The sobbing came from a room next to the one from which Fowler had come. Fowler knocked once on the door of this room, then opened it and went in. The gunman did not move.

Jeanne de Soulignac lay on a cot. She did not sob often, and then it was in little jerky bursts, but tears rolled continuously down her cheeks. She stared at the ceiling.

"I—I'm sorry about your father, *mademoiselle.*"

She gasped, seeing him.

"He's dead," she whispered.

Fowler nodded. He closed the door.

She asked: "Who are you?"

He told her, and told her everything he knew about the *Gypsy's* and the Maîtrejean brothers. She was thunderstruck to learn that he had been in the Château de Soulignac.

"That must have been just after Father and I went to the village. A boy came with a note saying somebody at the station wanted to see us, and we supposed it was you, coming from Amsterdam. We didn't take the *Gypsy's* with us because we never dreamed that anything would happen to it. Anyway Marcelline was there."

She shuddered a little and looked at her hands. Even in her grief she was easy to gaze upon. The tears were not unkind to her face, to the pale creamy skin that was in such contrast to the raven hair. Neither did those tears redden her large dark eyes.

"Marcelline was still there when we went back—but oh! how hideous she looked! She must have resisted them!"

"That was why they didn't want me walking in," Fowler said. "They wanted time to search the place. They probably hadn't even begun to look for the *Gypsy's* when I came long. What a fool I was!"

"You would have been killed if you'd gone back there. And if you did call the *gendarmes,* the murderers would still have had plenty of time to escape anyway."

"They were afraid I'd seen them, even as it was. One of them took a shot at me a little later."

She had ceased to weep, but now the tears came again.

"Poor Father," she whispered. "It was all we had left and he simply wouldn't consent to sell it. The publicity would have killed him. Everybody knew how poor we were anyway, as I tried to tell him, but he was still living in the grand days of the past.

"He thought it would be a scandal to admit that we needed funds. He thought that if he could just raise money on the *Gypsy's,* quietly, confidentially—"

THE door opened and Georges and Jules Maîtrejean came in. Jules looked woebegone, as always. There was a bluish-gray mouse under Georges' left eye, but he smiled on.

"Is *monsieur's* head clear?"

"No."

"Ah! but it will be, soon. You may have brandy or coffee or whatever you wish. You have only to call for it."

"I'm overwhelmed," muttered Fowler.

"Would *monsieur* care to see the *Gypsy's,* so that he will perhaps be making plans in his head?"

It was a temptation too strong to be resisted.

"I'm not going to work on it," Fowler insisted, "but I would like a look."

"But certainly!" As unconcernedly

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as though offering a box of matches, he took his hand out of his pocket. "Here it is."

Seventy-one carats, as great diamonds go, is neither heavy nor light. The Koh-i-nor, one hundred eighty-six carats in its original Oriental cutting, is one hundred and nine today; the Pitt Regent, which the French government owns, is one hundred and forty-three; the Orloff was close to one hundred and ninety-five in its original cutting when that prince paid $450,000 for it and presented it to Catherine the Great, never dreaming that it would some day become the property of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics; the Victoria, for which the Nizam of Hyderabad is reported to have paid $2,000,000, is one hundred and eighty; and the Cullinan, out of which seven magnificent diamonds were cut, two of them the biggest in the world, originally weighed 3,106 carats!

Nevertheless, sheer heft is not everything. There is color—the *Gypsy's* was a pure water-white—and there is historical background. The celebrated Sancy, of fifty-three carats, cost a French king $625,000. For the Hope Blue, only forty-four carats in its present cutting, the late Edward McLean of Washington paid $300,000.

The *Gypsy's* was seventy-one and three thirty-seconds; and it was the quintessence of all beauty. It was so lovely that as he held it in a hand that suddenly seemed coarse and ugly, Fowler Clark caught his breath at his own temerity. He was a hard-boiled business man, or thought he was, but when he looked down at the *Gypsy's* he felt like weeping.

"Attractive gaud, isn't it?" The Smiler was playacting again. "My brother thinks a square brilliant cut would be best. Sixty-six facets."

Fowler nodded absently.

"It would be best for any other stone like this, yes. But it would be sacrilege to recut the *Gypsy's*. Think of its associations! Anyway, cut like the Cullinan IV it wouldn't weigh nearly as much."

"But the cut is fashionable, *n'est-ce pas?* Such a stone would bring a good price. As for associations—" He snorted. "How could I get anything for the *Gypsy's* itself? Any dealer in the world would recognize it, and would know that a woman had been killed to get it. Whoever offers the *Gypsy's* for sale, *monsieur,* offers his neck to the guillotine."

"But to recut this—it would—it would be horrible!"

"Nevertheless you will do it, *monsieur.*"

"I will not."

"I know, from what my brother tells me, that your head must be perfectly clear and your hands perfectly steady before you commence such a task. You will have twelve hours. You may sleep, if you wish. You may go down to Aux Pauvres Diables—Jules will show you the way. But in twelve hours you must start to work."

"Go to hell!"

"There has already been one passage through the Squealers' Gate tonight."

"That won't frighten me. At least, it won't frighten me enough to make me desecrate this stone."

"There are things that could be done first. Screams, *monsieur,* are not heard outside."

"TORTURE, eh?" Fowler looked down at the *Gypsy's* and smiled. Its beauty gave him courage. "If you tortured me," he pointed out, "I would be in no condition afterward to perform such a delicate operation."

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This thought had not occurred to the Smiler.

"Very well then," he said after a moment. "I will tell you the second reason why I had you brought here."

"Yes?"

"You were seen at the Château de Soulignac yesterday morning—it is well after midnight now, *monsieur*—at just about the hour when the servant Marcelline Yost was murdered."

Fowler looked up.

"Seen by her murderers, your men, who wouldn't dare come forward and testify against me!"

"That would not be necessary. An anonymous telephone call to the police would turn their attention to you. Then you would be picked up in some public park, unconscious, with whisky spilled upon you to drown the fumes of the chloroform.

"Your disarranged evening clothes would lend color to the scene. Your fingerprints would be taken, as a result of that anonymous message. Is it likely that you failed to leave a print somewhere about the premises, *monsieur?* And there would be the driver of the taxi, and a station master or two, and various villagers. Oh, you'd be remembered!"

He was smiling, nodding triumphantly.

Fowler Clark swallowed. Yes, it would not be necessary to frame evidence. The Smiler needed only to keep out of it, himself and his underlings, and to put the police on the trail of Fowler.

"You see, *monsieur,* if the Squealers' Gate does not daunt you, I have other resources. It is unlikely that you would reach the guillotine, but you would probably spend the rest of your life in French Guiana."

Devil's Island! Fowler stared.

"I must think it over," he muttered.

"Certainly, *monsieur.* You have twelve hours."

Fowler looked at the girl. "And *mademoiselle?*"

"I have other plans for her," said the Smiler.

Before the significance of this remark could sink in he became all fussy courtesy, mockingly the host. Was there anything they wished? The resources of his establishment, vaster, he assured them, than they would suppose, were at their disposal.

"As a matter of fact, I am hungry," Fowler admitted. He looked at the girl. "It would help you too, *mademoiselle,* to eat."

She nodded very slowly.

"But of course," cried the Smiler. "Jules will show you the way. Jules!"

Solemnly Fowler Clark offered the girl his arm.

CHAPTER VII

THE SOUND OF DIAMONDS

THEY were to know that subterranean chamber well in the next few days. Aux Pauvres Diables did not invite casual trade; indeed it was less a café than a private club, and any member of the uninitiated who might attempt to enter would soon learn his error; but for all its grim atmosphere, it had the finest of drinks and amazingly good food.

At any hour of the day or night the tubby Jacques, always truculent of mien, could produce choice vintage wines and viands of which the finest restaurants of Marseille, a gourmand's heaven, might well be proud. The Maîtrejean brothers, and those who worked for them, lived well.

After the first meal, an omelette, *oursin, brioche* and Château Lafite

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1904, Fowler dropped the idea of a dash for liberty. Jacques' hand was seldom far from the knives under the bar. At least one Apache always sat near the door, not eating, not drinking, simply watching them; and beyond doubt another was posted above, at the street entrance. Jules Maîtrejean and sometimes his brother came and went. One of the two gunmen was in constant attendance, alert, his hand in his pocket.

To outward appearances they were mere customers. They sat at any table; they ordered whatever they wanted; Jacques, surly though he was, obeyed them. But they knew better. One step toward that door . . .

"You speak English, *mademoiselle?*"

"Oh, yes."

"Let us speak in English, then. It's not likely that any but the Maîtrejeans understand it."

He pecked at his *oursin,* and tried not to look at the Squealers' Gate. Obviously that gate meant nothing to Jeanne de Soulignac, who had probably not even noticed it. Which was just as well.

She looked only a girl, yet she was bearing up wonderfully. There was nothing hysterical about her. She kept her wits together. All the same, if she knew that she faced the exit her father had taken . . .

The Comte de Soulignac of course had been dead when the tide sucked him out into the old Port, perhaps to the open sea. Had Martin been dead? Or had they simply bound him and thrust him into that ancient sewer? It was best not to think of these things.

Mademoiselle de Soulignac kept her eyes cast down.

"Are you going to recut the *Gypsy's?*" she asked quietly.

He was evasive. "The *Gypsy's* is a very beautiful stone. Not like—not like this poor thing of mine, which is off-color."

"A gift? From some woman who loves you, perhaps?"

"From my father."

It was an unfortunate relationship to mention. The girl was trying not to think of her father.

"But you will recut the *Gypsy's?*" she persisted.

"I have eleven and a half hours in which to decide. We might as well use every second of that time. Something might happen. Is it true that your father did not notify the police that you were coming here?"

"Yes, I'm afraid it is. He would not listen to me. And I didn't dare let him come alone. I thought that perhaps I could restrain him." She drank a little wine. "They will kill us," she said at last, "when you have finished the work."

"Of course. They wouldn't dare let us go."

"Your firm? Won't you be missed?"

"They'll worry about me, but they won't go to the police. You see, I was sent out on a confidential mission. My employers had promised to keep my visit a secret. They'll respect this. For all they know I might be haggling about a price."

He dropped his cigarette on the floor.

"Let's get some sleep," he suggested. "Jules!"

YET when he returned to the workroom he did not lie down. Instead he examined the whole place very carefully. He tapped the walls. He went around on hands and knees tapping the floor. He stood on the table and tapped the ceiling. His face had an attentive, faraway look, like that of a physician who uses a stethoscope. Somewhere in

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this windowless chamber there must be a weak spot.

He found it at last. This was a wild chance, of course. The hollow sound he heard in the wall opposite the door, low down, just above the baseboard, was presumably a flaw in construction; but he could not be sure. Even if he succeeded in digging a hole through the wall, he might find that it did not lead outside but only into another room. But at least it was a possibility to work on.

He tested the baseboard with his fingers. It was loose, but when he tried to pull it away it squeaked loudly. He tiptoed to the door, put his head down near the keyhole which he had covered with a handkerchief, and listened. He smiled a little. Yes, there was breathing. Somebody on the other side was listening too.

Then, and not until then, he stretched out on the cot. He went instantly to sleep.

He must have slept for more than ten hours. When he woke up it was to find Georges and Jules Maîtrejean standing over him while in the doorway Mademoiselle de Soulignac watched with anxious eyes.

"Your time is up, *monsieur*. Do you feel well?"

Fowler stretched, yawned.

"So-so."

"Then you will start immediately to recut the *Gypsy's*."

"No."

"What! You refuse?"

"I refuse to start now," said Fowler. "I want some coffee first, and something to eat."

"Ah! that is easily arranged."

"And when that's finished I want it agreed that if I'm going to cut this stone I must have absolute quiet."

He saw the despairing look in Jeanne de Soulignac's eyes. For all the trouble it had brought her, she must have loved that diamond. And for all the peril of her position, she must have hoped until this moment that Fowler would refuse to do the work. He did not look at the doorway again.

"What's more, there mustn't be anybody in here while I'm eating. I won't have anybody disturbing my tools. I insist that I be given the key to this room when I go downstairs."

"I see no reason why this should not be done, *monsieur*. We appreciate the fact that your nerves must be in the best possible condition."

"Exactly."

"My brother tells me that if you work nine or ten hours a day the task should be finished in two days?"

"Well, I'm not going to work nine or ten hours a day. Do you think that polishing a diamond is like laying bricks or papering a wall?

"Besides, this right arm of mine is still stiff. If I use the muscles too much I might ruin the whole job. No, I'll work two or three hours in the morning and two or three in the afternoon, and that's all. I want three whole days for the job."

"Very good, *monsieur*. But you have said three days. Let it be no longer! By Friday evening at eight—it is Wednesday evening now," informed the Smiler, remembering that there was no trace of daylight here—"you will hand us the *Gypsy's* reduced to a Cullinan IV cut. And now you will start!"

"And now," corrected Fowler, "I will eat."

JEANNE DE SOULIGNAC was quiet at that meal. She did not reproach him for submitting to the commands of Georges Maîtrejean. She understood that he was stalling for time,

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that he was hoping that somehow they might be rescued, and that his skill as a lapidary was the only thing that stood between them and death. Even so, the though of the *Gypsy's* being hacked into a conventional, fashionable stone of commerce was a thought hard to bear.

"It will—I suppose it will be very pretty anyway," she ventured once, talking more to herself than to him.

He was businesslike. "Have you examined your room?"

"What? Oh . . ." She shook her head hopelessly. "I might as well be in prison there." She looked at him. "And yours?"

He did not wish to raise her hopes. "I'll have to keep working most of the time. They'll be listening."

The Smiler had given her a long cloak to cover her dress. Fowler's dinner suit had been replaced by a pair of coarse trousers, a cap and scarf, a laborer's blouse. Occasional customers would glance at them as they sat in a corner, but nobody gaped. The men who were admitted into Aux Pauvres Diables knew better than to stare at anything or to ask questions.

Considering its clientele, and its management, Aux Pauvres Diables was a singularly quiet place. Nobody stayed long. Nobody ever raised his voice.

It was true that the customers were footpads, sneak thieves, burglars, pickpockets, murderers; but in Aux Pauvres Diables they behaved themselves. It was true that *pastis* was sold, tall green glasses of it, in defiance of French law, but as much might be said of many another café in the neighborhood. There was no drunkenness.

Jules Maîtrejean came to their table. "*Monsieur* will start the work now?"

Fowler sighed, and rose.

"All right."

THEY met three times a day after that, for meals, and they talked about everything under the sun. He told her of his work, of his start in New York, his promotion to the main office in Amsterdam.

She told him about life with her father in the mouldering Château Soulignac, where her principal pastime was the reading of such musty volumes as were left in the library. They spoke sometimes in French but mostly in English. They ignored the slit-eyed guards, and were careful never to mention the future. They exchanged anecdotes and experiences; sometimes they even laughed; but all the while each was wondering what would happen at the end of the third day.

At such times the key of the workroom was always in Fowler's pocket, and whenever he returned to that room he looked around carefully to make sure that nothing had been disturbed.

Once he had locked himself in, he might have been the only man in the world. Yet he knew that there was a guard out there in the hall night and day, and he knew too that Jules Maîtrejean not infrequently came to listen at the door. Fowler, indeed, had surprised him there the first afternoon when he went out to stretch his legs.

"Hello. Getting an earful?"

"I only wished to be sure that *monsieur* was working."

Fowler grinned. "You heard the skeep, didn't you? Twenty-five hundred revolutions a minute. But it takes a long while."

"I heard the sound of diamond cutting diamond," Jules murmured almost ecstatically, "and it is a good sound to hear."

Fowler finished his cigarette.

"Stick around and you'll hear some more of it," he promised.

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Of the building they were in they knew very little. For all the Smiler's protestations of hospitality, they were carefully watched when they were not in their rooms.

They believed that Aux Pauvres Diables was actually in another building; probably several buildings were connected, as was often the case in this old part of the city. But in all the time they were there they never caught a glimpse of daylight or the world outside, nor did they ever hear any street hawkers or traffic. The Maîtrejean domain was a world unto itself.

All Jeanne de Soulignac and Fowler Clark knew of it was their respective rooms, the short dim corridor outside, a steep and very long flight of wooden steps, another corridor, another flight of steps—and Aux Pauvres Diables.

They never walked this route without at least one guard close behind them. Instinctively they spoke in whispers, and as they walked their footsteps were muffled, the dead-seeming air muffling all echoes. Here in a busy cosmopolitan city, within a few yards of one of the greatest waterfronts in the world, they languished like prisoners in some fabled dungeon.

Delivery of the recut *Gypsy's* was due at eight o'clock Friday night. At six o'clock that night there was a knock on Fowler's door. He got up from the floor, upon which he had been lying full-length, and put the baseboard back into place.

He brushed his clothes. He shut off the electric power, and the horizontal wheel of soft iron, its edge gritty with diamond dust mixed with olive oil, *whee-ed* to a stop. He touched the jamb peg, moved the dop in which the diamond was soldered. He went to the door and opened it scarcely an inch.

"*Monsieur* wishes dinner?" whined Jules Maîtrejean.

"No! I told you I wasn't to be disturbed!"

The little man had only been making an excuse. His curiosity had got the better of him. He tried to peer past Fowler.

"Only two more hours. . . ." He giggled a little. "You will be ready, *monsieur?*"

"I'll be ready, don't worry. Now beat it."

He closed and locked the door.

CHAPTER VIII

A SCARF FOR SILENCE

HE RESET the dop and restarted the skeep, and once again the unmistakable sound of diamond grating against diamond filled the room. It had been necessary throughout these three days to shift the position of the dop from time to time in order to make it sound as though much work was being done. As a matter of fact, the only thing being accomplished—at the workbench—was the creation of a heap of bright dust.

Fowler stretched out on the floor again.

It had been much more difficult than he expected. The baseboard, which he had removed under cover of the sound of diamonds, was only about seven inches high. The wall just above this was mere thin lathes and plaster which could easily be removed, but unlike the baseboard it could not be replaced; and though he kept the keyhole covered, even when he was downstairs, he could not run the risk of somebody catching a glimpse of the hole as he went in or out of the room.

Consequently he had been obliged, until tonight, to work flat on his belly.

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sticking first one arm, then the other, through the narrow aperture. Tonight it was different. He was not going to open or shut that door again—he hoped.

He tore out the lathes and plaster and surveyed his handiwork for the first time: until now he had been operating only by feel.

Beyond the hollow space his tapping had discovered—a space of about one cubic foot—was a sheet of material which his fingers had first suggested was steel. He had learned his mistake.

It was not steel or any other metal but apparently some sort of rubber compound, thick, smooth, very strong. What it was doing there he didn't know, but it was firmly in place. He could only guess that it was some kind of soundproofing—though certainly the door of this room, at least, was not soundproof.

As Georges Maîtrejean had said, they were old-fashioned in some respects, this gang, but exceedingly modern in others. A soundproofed room in this labyrinth of old and evil buildings was as incongruous and unexpected as an air-conditioning plant in a medieval castle. Nevertheless, there it was. It had given him infinite trouble, but he had finally cut a large square out of it.

His prowling fingers had next found a wall, each stone of which was about eighteen inches square. The cement, though old, was stubborn. Moreover the tools at his command were few, and he did not dare to hack at the loosened cement with his fingernails, for that would be to break those nails and lacerate the ends of his fingers, and the result would surely be noticed when he went to meals. You do not scrape your fingers raw when you are recutting a diamond.

First one arm, then the other. It had been agonizing work. The skeep drowned whatever noises he made, but he had been obliged to stop every now and then to shift the dop. Somebody might be listening. He had to make it seem to ears out in the corridor that he was cutting facet after facet. And all the while the heap of diamond dust grew larger.

But he was near the end now. When he left this room, he told himself grimly, it wouldn't be by way of the door. Not unless they carried him out dead. There was still a good chance that *that* might happen!

MOST of the cement was gone. With more room to work in, now that he'd torn away lathes and plaster, he braced his elbows against his knees and slowly, very carefully, dragged the whole stone into the room. Squatting, he looked through the hole.

There had always been the chance that this might lead him nowhere. Undoubtedly this rookery was a maze of rooms, yards, connecting doors, dead-end corridors. Almost anything might be on the other side of this stone he had just removed.

From where he squatted he looked down. And when he saw cobblestones his heart gave a leap of joy.

A street! He could wriggle through that hole. He could let himself drop—it was a matter of perhaps twelve feet—and find his way to the Quai du Port, to a taxi, to the police. Then back here.

"It is very near the time. May *le bon Dieu* help the American if he has been playing tricks on us."

The voice was that of the Smiler, and it was startlingly close. For an instant Fowler thought it must be coming through the violated wall. Then he realized that it was coming from outside, from below.

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Jules answered soothingly.

"He is not playing tricks. Again and again during these past three days I have listened at his door. I know that sound, *mon frère*. It is diamond dust cutting diamond."

The Maîtrejeans were directly below. But it was not this that caused despair to strike into him. It was the fact that he looked upon no street but merely a cobbled court a few yards wide and perhaps four times as long, scarcely more than a slit among the buildings.

Opposite was a wall in which there were but two windows and those high up and heavily barred. At either end of the court was an open door, a rectangle of blackness.

No, he had not come out into another room, but he might as well have done so. From the way they stood at ease, smoking cigarettes that glowed like fireflies, it was clear that the Maîtrejeans were entirely at home. Either door, beyond doubt, would lead into some part of this crazy conglomeration of knocked-together chambers in which they ruled supreme.

The Smiler pulled on his cigarette, and his face, previously silvered by moonlight, flared scarlet.

Exhaling, he said: "Go up there now, Jules, and demand to see the stone. It must be very nearly finished."

Fowler pulled his head in. There would be a knock on the door in a minute or so, and if it were not promptly answered the door would be smashed in. But if in the meanwhile the Smiler . . .

No. He looked out again and saw that it was too late for a desperate assault upon the Smiler. The man was walking away. He went through the door on the right.

Fowler wriggled back into the room, straightened the kinks out of his muscles. He shut off the electric current. There was no diamond at all left in the dop now. There was only a pile of dust underneath. Once the skeep had stopped the room was eerily still; and the rap on the door was like a shot.

"Yes?"

"Ouvrez, s'il vous plaît, monsieur."

Jules' voice, of course. Fowler swiftly unscrewed the heavy iron tongs which held the dop. He wrapped a handkerchief around these. He took off his scarf.

Renewed knocking on the door.

"All right! All right!"

He opened the door an inch or so. He didn't wish Jules to see the hole in the wall, yet.

"You're after the *Gypsy's,* I suppose?" His eyes were busy. There was nobody directly behind Jules, nobody near him, though the usual guard loafed at the end of the corridor near the stairs. "Well, it's ready. Step in and I'll show it to you."

JULES MAÎTREJEAN was ordinarily a cautious man. But the *Gypsy's* had before this been known to chase caution away. The very thought of the *Gypsy's* was heady as sparkling wine. Jules stepped in.

A scarf slithered around his neck and was drawn sharp from behind. With his free hand Fowler closed and locked the door.

Jules Maîtrejean did not move. Fowler deliberately turned him around, standing behind him, holding the scarf with his left hand. With his right hand he picked up the handkerchief-wrapped iron tongs.

This was very hard to do. The thought of it rasped his spine like a discordant noise, like the horrid *squee* of a slate pencil. But any scuffle would have been heard by the guard. And

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Fowler had more than himself to think of: he had Jeanne de Soulignac.

He brought the tongs down directly on the top of Jules' head. The man's knees sagged. Unable to say a word because of what was around his neck, he began to flap his arms. Fowler hit him again—and caught him as he slumped unconscious to the floor.

It was a bitter disappointment to find that Jules Maîtrejean carried no weapon. Had it not been for his hope of getting a pistol, or at least a knife, Fowler would have ignored the knocking and wriggled through the hole in the wall, taking his chances below. Now he had to do this anyway, barehanded.

The tongs bar was too awkward for use in a fight, and to venture outside the door would be to rouse the suspicion of the guard who would demand to be told what had happened to Jules Maîtrejean.

He got down on the floor again. He stuck his head through the opening. The court was deserted, moonlight lying tenderly on the cobblestones, and the two barred windows in the opposite walls were blank and dark. He pulled his head back, reversed his position, and squirmed through the opening feet first. For just an instant he hung by his hands. Then he let go.

He landed easily and without a sound. He ran silently through the door on the left.

CHAPTER IX.

SQUEALERS' GATE

IT WAS not as dark in there as it had seemed from outside. There was a dusty electric bulb some distance down the corridor and it gave just enough light to raise shadows. Fowler moved without hesitation, just as if he knew where he was going.

Obviously he was on the street level now, so he decided not to use stairways if possible. The corridor dead-ended, but there was another leading off it before the end was reached. Fowler turned into this—and almost collided with an Apache.

The Apache was slouching along, hands deep in trousers pockets, an unlighted cigarette dangling from his mouth. Fowler tensed, his fists ready. But the Apache only nodded and walked on.

It came to Fowler that after all he was wearing a workman's clothes. His hair was mussed, his face sweaty, on his chin and cheeks was a three-days' growth of beard. There had been no hue and cry yet, and of course he had been mistaken for one of the Maîtrejean underlings.

He was just congratulating himself upon this fact when the Apache returned, asking for a match. Fowler shook his head. But the Apache meanwhile had seen his ring.

His right hand came out of his pocket, went under his coat. Fowler grabbed his wrist and punched his jaw. The Apache staggered back, tearing himself free. He was still tugging at something under his coat. Fowler went after him, arms outstretched.

The Apache turned, and ran past a stairway. Then he stopped suddenly, wheeling. He had his gun out now, a large old-fashioned revolver. Fowler saw the stairway and fell down it—deliberately pitched himself head-first over the bannister as though he were diving into water—as the revolver exploded, making a terrific din, causing dust to jump on the floor, raising echoes from far, unseen places.

To Fowler it was like being clubbed. An acrobat doubtless could have done it without getting hurt; but Fowler

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Clark was not an expert in the art of falling. Stinging pain shot through his left arm. The wound in his right forearm, caused by one of Jacques' knives, which had been quiet for two days, began to throb again. Something struck his forehead. His foot caught between two of the palings—and he stopped falling.

For a moment the world refused to be stable; it rocked and revolved with a tantalizing persistence. The Apache could have killed him in that moment. But the Apache, frightened, confused, ran away: he was shouting at the top of his lungs.

Fowler very carefully got to his feet. He was halfway down the stairs, but for a little while he was so dizzy that he could not move; he stood swaying, holding the rail. Then he started up.

There was a rush of feet above him. He turned and ran downstairs.

As he cleared the last step a knife *slished* past his ear and clattered on the floor. A man came out of a door at his left; there was a babble of voices just ahead—

IN HER room, sitting breathless, Jeanne de Soulignac heard the chase—the shot, the shouts, running feet, thumps, gasps, pants. She guessed what it meant.

The American was making a desperate break for freedom, and he was being hunted down like a scurrying rat, finding no hole in which to hide. Back and forth through this rabbit warren, and up and down, they were after him. And they would certainly get him. They'd run him to earth at last, corner him, slaughter him. His work was done now; the *Gypsy's* had been recut—had not she herself heard the grating skeep these past three days?—and they had no further use for him.

But it was wrong! He had been so cool and easy of manner, so polite when they talked together in Aux Pauvres Diables, telling her stories, chatting pleasantly in an effort to make her forget where she was, all the time facing a slow-approaching death with impeccable manners. It was wrong that a man like that should be harried into a cul-de-sac and squashed.

Somebody ran past her door. She went to the door, opened it. The usual guard was not there, but Georges Maîtrejean stood giving orders to a couple of panting Apaches.

He turned to her. He had been worried, and his face told it, but he was sure of himself now; his old cockiness had returned.

"Your friend the American, *mademoiselle,* has been made giddy by the *Gypsy's,* like many a better man. It went to his head. I have just looked into his room and it is not there, nor is he. He is making an insane attempt to escape—for the sake of a diamond!"

She did not answer. She was sure that the American was no man to try to run off and leave her to her fate. Of course he had meant, if he ever reached the street, to bring back a raiding party.

"He does not know how cleverly this place was designed," the Smiler continued proudly. "There is only one possible way to get from any part of it out into the street and that is by passing through the café downstairs. He has stumbled into that, the fool. He's trapped. Already I have four men posted at the street entrance, anticipating him. And now I will go down and finish him off myself."

He made an elaborate bow, and when he went downstairs he was whistling. At the head of the lower flight he brushed away a group of his minions. No, the chief himself would handle

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this American. The chief had not forgotten how the American's fist had felt against his eye.

"You are sure he is down there?"

"Oh, absolutely!"

"And Jacques?"

"He went up to help guard the street entrance, when you first gave the order to block it."

"The American is there all alone, then?"

"He is there all alone."

"Very good. Stand back."

Very slowly, almost sedately, he descended. He was whistling. His hands were on the butts of the Brownings.

When he saw the water he began to be frightened. There was six or seven inches of it on the floor of the café. He was less sedate as he covered the last few steps.

FACING him, on the lowest of the steps that led up to the street, stood Fowler Clark. Every inch of his person was wet. His hands were behind his back. He smiled.

"I went out by way of the Squealers' Gate after all," he said. "But I went under my own power. And fortunately the tide is not yet high, though it's rising."

The Smiler glanced at the gate and saw that it was open and that through it water was spilling into the café.

"I was lucky enough to run into some *gendarmes* just after I'd clambered up onto the seawall. There are lots of them outside. They've been watching this place closer than you thought. They were only looking for an excuse to break in—and I supplied it. They've got handcuffs on your entrance guards already, and they'll be down here any minute now."

Georges Maîtrejean's thumbs clicked off the safety catches of the automatics in his pockets. His smile was a fixed mechanical thing now, expressionless. He was frightened.

"I wouldn't pull them out," Fowler said softly. "The *gendarmes* were kind enough to supply me with a revolver." Then, as he remembered the Comte de Soulignac and the sufferings of Jeanne, his voice got harsh; his eyes hardened. "All right, go ahead and pull them out! You've boasted enough: now let's see whether you're any good."

The Smiler did not move.

"You know what I'm holding in back of me. All right, let's see how fast you can get yours out. I'm like the cops were: all I want is an excuse."

Wisely, the Smiler did not try to draw both automatics at the same time, but the one he did draw first was the left-hand one. This was the first time Fowler had noticed that the man was left-handed. For a fleet instant, though it shouldn't have done so, the fact disconcerted him. And it was thus that the Smiler got in the first shot. He fired from the hip, too soon, too low.

Fowler raised his pistol, sighted it. The automatic boomed a second time just as Fowler squeezed the trigger of his revolver.

He felt something tug gently at his right sleeve. It was as though somebody were trying to get his attention; and behind him a chunk of lead clacked and clanged on the stone steps.

There was a hole in the sleeve.

The revolver had kicked only the slightest bit. He lowered the muzzle, bringing the sights back in line with the Smiler's chest.

But there was no need to fire again. Georges Maîtrejean was falling. He continued to smile, but it meant nothing now. It was the grimace of a dummy, for he couldn't have been conscious.

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He fell forward, very stiff, like a chopped-down tree. He had started to draw the automatic in his right hand, and when it was half out of the holster some nervous twitch, some muscular activity, caused him unwittingly to fire it.

There was an immediate smell of burning cloth. The shock of the recoil jerked Georges Maîtrejean half around as though he had been pushed by a stick, but his body remained stiff, and when he fell with a splash into the water, he fell on his side—still smiling.

"BUT I don't understand," Jeanne de Soulignac cried, two hours later when they were talking it over in a nearby café. "How did you ever manage to cut through that sheet of rubber compound or whatever it was? You said it was hard as steel."

"Yes, but I had something harder."

He took a hand out of his coat pocket and spun something across the table. It caught lights from above as it rolled, and threw them back red and green and blue and orange. Teeming with fire, it came to rest.

"I wasn't cutting the *Gypsy's*. There were some tiny chunks of carbonado there—it's a black diamond that's used as an abrasive—and a little bort, diamond fragments. I soldered those into the dop one by one and ground them to powder just so's to keep up the right sound."

He gazed at the jewel that lay between them.

"So this is yours now. And if you still want a conference with the representative of Bottche Brothers, I can promise you a loan of anything up to a quarter of a million dollars on it. The company has agreed to act favorably upon any recommendation I make in this case."

"Oh . . . I could take a little for six months perhaps. But I don't know how— I don't know at the end of that time—"

"Almost anything," he said, and slipped a hand over hers, "might happen in six months."

She saw his ring.

"The diamond your father gave you!"

"There wasn't enough bort and carbonado. And I had to keep up that noise. The diamond Father gave me is just so much dust now."

"What a pity! Do you think he—"

"I think that if he were alive Father would understand and approve," said Fowler Clark. "He was a pretty broad-minded man, Father was."

THE END

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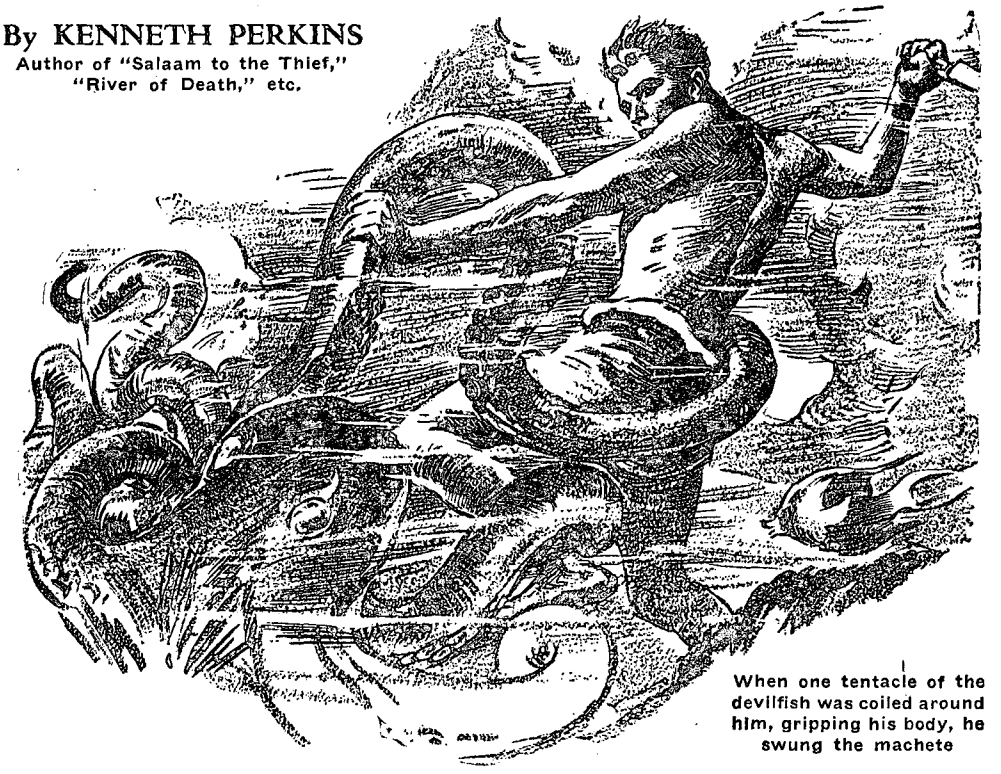
The Sea Ghost

By KENNETH PERKINS
Author of "Salaam to the Thief," "River of Death," etc.



When one tentacle of the devilfish was coiled around him, gripping his body, he swung the machete

More terrible to face, more agonizing to tear loose than the tentacles of any devilfish: the fear and defeat that takes hold on a man's spirit. And there are more rewards than one for the man who can lay a ghost

A MAN sat on the fringing reef of Yaws Island looking into the lagoon. He was a pulpy man in damp whites and he kept rolling a fat Manila cigar from one side of his mouth to the other.

He could see another man holding himself to the fans of coral on the lagoon's bottom at a depth of about nine feet. The diver came up, water streaming from his red hair into his reddened eyes. He had two flat rocks in his hands and he set these on the bank so that he could pull himself out of the water.

Then he rested there, clinging, breathing heavily and staring at the man above him.

The latter puffed, his flabby arms folded across his knees so that his chin rested on one white sleeve. He took his cigar out of his mouth and said calmly, "You didn't clap those rocks together, did you?"

The diver's eyes flamed hard and bright then faded to the customary

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bloodshot blue. "How could I clap them when I had to cling to the bottom? You can't stay on the bottom in naked diving."

"The rock's hold you down. Go ahead, dive again."

"Maybe we better go back to the village and ask the kanakas what to do."

"You know what to do. Except you've got no guts."

"But the kanakas can get a devilfish out of its cave with a sweet potato whistle. Or maybe rattling a cocoanut shell."

"They wouldn't come near this lagoon. You go down again. If you don't clap those rocks this time, I got something I can do." He stuck his cigar in his mouth and chewed it as the diver's eyes glinted again.

For a long time they glared at each other silently; then the diver dropped from the ledge and sank, weighted by the two rocks in his hands.

HE was the first white man ever to dive in this lagoon. At Yaws village they said no kanaka had dived here for a generation. This was because a devilfish lived in a cave under this fringing reef and some had seen it at low tide.

Those who had seen it talked about it in their own naïve figures of speech. For example they said this animal was the ghost of the devil Tumuraifenua. A devilfish seen through a glass box is hard to measure. With its trick of protective coloring it will seem to be a part of the long ridges of coral to which it clings.

A story starts. The kanakas on the next atoll hear it, and the atolls beyond. The "devil" grows bigger.

At Yaws Island the village kahuna embellished the story, doubtless to suit his own ends. But white men knew that he was merely employing the frightful imagery of any other witch doctor.

Nevertheless no one wanted to dive for pearl oysters in that particular lagoon. The native huts, fisheries and yam plantations were on another part of the island, the lagoon being cut off by a jungle of betel palms, a mangrove swamp, and a desolate expanse of fringing reef. On its seaward side the barrier reef held off the moving water beyond except for a sweeping tide.

The whole side of the island was shunned. Hence there might have been some wealth in the unexplored lagoon for anyone brave enough to grub for it. This was the view of Windy Whitell, one time beer salesman, now turned pearl trader. He was the blubber-muscled man who sat on the reef.

Feathery fish hovered down there like flocks of birds. Mollusks clung to the bottom and Whitell could see them as if he were looking through a seven-foot thickness of plate glass. Bright crabs scuttled everywhere.

These were the animals—mollusks, crabs, little fishes—that made good brit for any devilfish. All that was needed was a man with nerve enough to hunt the beast at low tide and hack it to pieces with a machete.

Windy Whitell knew he could do this but he employed another man whom he had picked up in a waterfront saloon on an island thirty miles away to do it instead.

Torch Hubbard—they called him Torch because of his red hair—was down there now. He had a machete thrust into his belt down the length of his naked thigh. The rest of his body gleamed nude and white—the white untanned skin of a beachcomber and loafer who rarely exposed his body to the tropic sun or trades.

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His whiteness down there was alarming; so was his red hair: for any water animal could see him from a good distance. That is why kanakas and Japanese are better divers than white men. They last longer.

Torch Hubbard was afraid to clap his rocks together. It took nerves and his nerves were shaky from a hangover. Kava and native brandy do not make a courageous diver unless a man has just drunk a lot and imagines himself a good opponent for any enemy on the earth or in the sea. In this case Torch was sober, and fearful.

WHEN he needed air he came up. Once when he emerged from the surface he had only one rock. In the other hand he held a snow-white seashell and this he placed on the bank, grinning sheepishly. He hid the shell under a brown palm frond, for he did not want the other man to see what he'd been up to.

But Whitell had caught a glimpse of the sparkling white for he said, "Say, listen. Did you go down there to kill a devilfish or to pick flowers?"

Torch's grin made his ghastly face skull-like. The curl had gone out of his hair and he had a chill which made him shaky and miserable. "There's nothing down there," he pleaded, "except coral and shells—shells that've been sucked dry."

"Sure. Shell oysters," Whitell said. "They're dry, but there'll be more. Plenty. But they don't concern you. I'm paying you for killing a devilfish and already you worry about pearls which ain't in the contract. You're getting cash, and you pick flowers."

The two men grinned slowly, the one tightening his lips over his cigar, the other showing his teeth, terrified and idiotic.

Their silence was so tense that Torch Hubbard wanted to scream. He tried it, but could only gibber, "I won't go down there and wait for that thing to come out. I saw one of its arms. I saw its eyes in the cave. I'm not going to have my flesh sucked off my bones!"

"Enough of that talk!" Hubbard said, scarcely opening his lips over his cigar. "You're making up a nightmare in your head. You can make up a good one, I don't doubt, what with your boozy brains."

The diver stopped gibbering and stood waist deep, panting frantically.

"I told you you didn't have the nerve when you asked me for a job," Whitell said. "Then you let me charter a yawl and come over here, and you welch."

The red-eyed, red-haired man stared with the sick frenzy of a mad dog that has just been doused with water. The other one puffed in impatient little spurts. He took up a spear which he had gotten at the village: a murderous weapon with poison in the sinnet whipping that fastened the handle to the blade. They had brought it along to supplement the machete. He poked the red-haired man in the ribs, grinning.

Torch Hubbard winced. "No, no, don't! Don't start that stuff. I'll try it—I'll try it again."

"Go ahead, dive. If you haven't the guts to draw the thing out yourself, I'll get it out with a crab."

He reached for a fishing line and stuck its pearl hook into the shell of a red spotted crab.

Torch Hubbard watched him, fascinated; then when their eyes met he let go his hold on the coral ledge, humped himself like a lean garfish and went down.

Sea birds screamed in alarm. Clouds

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of fire ants hovered over the widening circles of rippling silver. Windy Whitell dropped his fishing line over the shelf of coral and watched the crab shell on the hook zigzag downward as if it were alive.

He chewed at his cigar, sucking it, unaware that it had gone out. The sand flies that had stayed away from the smoke clouded about his head, but he was unaware of them too. His eyes fixed on the depths, as he made the crab jump and dance on the lagoon floor, enjoying the game like a boy with a new toy.

UNDERWATER, Torch Hubbard waited fearfully. He thought he saw a huge hunk of coral in the cave dwindle in size. He had heard that this is what a devilfish will do when it is waiting for food.

He was undecided whether to swim for the surface or to lie perfectly still and let the beast stretch out one of its sucker-bearing arms and examine him. In that moment vivid thoughts flashed like the dream of a past life as a man goes down for the last time to drown.

It was that gorgeous shell he had picked up which brought his thoughts away from the most hideous thing in the world to the most beautiful.

There were other shells like the one he had found, tucked away in crannies where the water darkened. They caught the green glow that pervaded the water, as sea shells catch a sound and imprison it forever, turning it into a song.

Beaming like that against jet blackness, the lighted shells evoked a picture of a girl with black hair and a lovely sheen to her eyes. Torch remembered how her eyes were the highlights in the dim room where he first met her.

This was a tourist's shop at Huva Bandu thirty miles away. She had a booth in the shop and sold shells of her own collecting. Torch talked with Molly Bartlett a long time, going there every day. Being on her own since the death of her parents, she was cautious about picking up with a penniless American. So he told her about himself.

He told her how he had jumped ship at Huva Bandu because he did not take to the job of mess punk on a coprax trader. Mess punk, hatch foreman, chief of stevies, bulker, San Francisco bond salesman—it would have been a good enough record if it had been told backward.

He was a good bond salesman—the first job—because his customers liked to drink with him, remembering his name as an Olympic swimmer. He lived high and drank deep. But when the public stopped buying securities his earnings stopped. They stopped for two years, then he came to the South Seas. The South Seas meant escape.

He saw himself in her eyes which were as bright as mirrors. His whites were frayed but very clean. He was shaved. His battered pith helmet was freshly pipeclayed and so were his shoes, although the soles had been worn completely through and replaced with rubber he had cut from an inner tube.

This was a native touch. The kanakas made their own sandals that way. The rubber changed his gait somehow, giving him a comfortable slouch. He was lean, long-boned, loose of joints, with a soft voice and not a sou in his pocket.

Looking into the girl's staring eyes he realized all of a sudden and for the first time in his life that he was a typical beachcomber!

Besides that, he had to confess to her that he was being kicked off the

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island. It was all because of a little regulation of the Colonial Administrative Office which demanded a deposit of an immigrant to cover his return passage to the last port should he find himself on the beach. He was trying to get a hundred dollars Mex somewhere so he could stay here where the girl was.

The next day she asked if he had found the hundred dollars Mex. When he gave the expected answer (no, but he had a line on something) she stared with a definite doubt in her eyes. She measured him as much as to say, "I wonder whether you're a real derelict —the kind that will run away from life." Then she thrust a hundred dollars across the counter.

She said she had sold her collection of shells, the good specimens she never showed to tourists. A Chinese curio dealer had given her the exact sum she needed, and no more.

TORCH HUBBARD chewed on this angrily, all his fury turned upon himself. "Look," he said. "I'm paying my own way. Don't you think I'd let a girl pay it. I'll live on cocoanuts before I play that game."

"But it's only a loan," she said. "It only means you can stay here. You'll still be on the beach. How you get off is up to you."

"I heard a fellow talking in a saloon on the waterfront. He thinks there's a chance of finding pearls on Yaws Island. He's got a concession from the French, but he can't get any divers. There's a story about a giant devilfish and the kanakas are afraid to dive. He'll pay me a hundred Mex if I kill it. Then he can get divers."

"How are you going to kill it when it isn't there? It's only a kanaka legend."

"But this fellow Windy Whitell said some Jap poachers went there and left the next day. One of 'em was missing. It bolsters up the story. Isn't there such a thing as a benthoctopus?"

"There're only in very deep water. Thousands of feet deep."

"One might have been trapped there when it was small. It couldn't get out because the tide seeps through the reef."

Her eyes were getting bigger now, and brighter. "You want to fight something that's thirty feet around?"

The doubt in her eyes burned into him so that he felt the same doubt himself. The Equatorial Pacific, the languorous trades, unsteady work and steady drinking had brought a shake to his fingers. He had no reason to think he would be braver than the next man. He was willing to confess it, being no boaster.

But instead he said, "Thirty feet around? Those big fellows are mostly gelatin in their tissues, with big flabby webs between their arms, and no teeth to speak of. It's the little ones that have teeth and free arms."

"But big or little, how can you fight it? What do you know about this business? It takes something."

"Sure, I know. Just a little nerve. This fellow Whitell made that clear before he'd dicker with me. He said I didn't look as if I had it. He said I'd welch. Maybe so, but I'm not letting someone else tell me."

"Why didn't you knock him down?"

Torch was nettled. He did not know why. He had always stayed out of barroom brawls. Besides he was asking the man for a job. He felt now that that might not have been the real reason.

Whitell was a big, heavy fellow; although Torch could have licked him, he had a little too much booze in his

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eyes at the time. He took the easier and more bombastic way: the beachcomber's way. And that was to shout at the saloon full of men that he was not afraid of any devilfish.

Thus he avoided the temporary fight. And thus he had run away from the drudgery of a mess punk. Thus he had run away from the States.

And now he had to answer the girl's question. "Instead of knocking Whitell down I went out to the waterfront and asked the kanaka fishermen how you kill a devilfish. You get a machete, or maybe a spear they call a *tavero*. You just lie still and wait for the thing to crawl up to you. Then you slice it in a certain spot."

She made an involuntary gesture, reaching for him. "I know this Windy Whitell. He always wants something for nothing. He'll get a man to do the dangerous work for him, even when it means risking that man's life."

But the dark look of doubt had begun to ebb, leaving a glow in her eyes. She said as if to herself, "You're going to lie still and wait for it—"

"You said it was only a legend—a ghost. I'm going to fight a ghost, that's all."

She knew what he meant. He was going to fight the ghost of himself.

AT YAWS ISLAND when Torch faced the test, it looked as if Windy Whitell had guessed about right. The man he had hired was a waterfront loafer and he had no guts. He would fail at the first sight of a devilfish stalking towards him.

Whitell stared hard into the blue water. While he dangled the red spotted crab in front of the cave he noticed an empty oyster shell on the lagoon floor.

A doubt made his stomach feel cold. Suppose there really was a giant down there; suppose all the oysters had been sucked dry. What if this diver actually killed a devilfish and then demanded his pay, when Whitell had nothing to gain?

Windy Whitell jumped to his feet with such a cumbersome windmilling of his fat arms that a parrot, watching him, squawked in wild senseless laughter. He turned, maddened, toward the palms to see where the laughter came from.

Some kanakas from the village were emerging cautiously from the betel palms like blue-faced boobies from a thicket. Whitell had the queer illusion that it was these villagers, not the parrot, that had laughed at him. His doubt rankled and wrenched at his vitals.

He beckoned to the villagers to come to the lagoon, but it was only their kahuna, an old man with salt-stained hair, that dared approach.

Meanwhile the diver came up. He clung to the ledge, scouring his wet hair with shaking fingers, gasping hysterically. But then he set his jaws and a sudden look of desperation made his eyes glint wild and clear.

"You saw something?" Whitell asked.

Torch nodded, choked for more air, then said, "I'm going down after it."

"Better wait," Whitell said, pointing his fat thumb over his shoulder at the kahuna. "Wait till that old duck gets here. I want to ask him something. There's a point I want cleared up before you go to any more risk."

"I won't wait," Torch Hubbard said. "If I wait, I'll lose my nerve. I'll never have my nerve again." He drew his machete with a slow mechanical movement of his arm as if his muscles twitched without his will.

"Listen," Whitell pleaded. "Maybe

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it's no use. It may be all for nothing—your diving."

But Torch was down.

As the fountain of silver bubbles sparkled upward from his diving body, the other man turned from the ledge, hearing the old kanaka's voice.

"Why will this white man sacrifice himself?" the witch doctor asked coming a few steps closer.

It was just the question Whitell wanted asked. He chewed his dead cigar, grinning. "He's going to kill that devil of yours, that's why. When we show you the carcass maybe some of your men will dive for me."

The kahuna shook his head. "I told the youths of the village not to dive for you but to plant yams and work the groves. I told them of the devil so they would not waste their youth and their lungs diving for pearls where there are none."

WHITELL'S eyes went pale, then glared with a slow, queer flame. "What are you talking about? You don't know that!"

"Look into the water and see the shells of the oysters. Look and see, they are empty."

"Well, you black-toothed idiot!" Whitell cried wildly. "There'll be more of 'em!"

But the kahuna said, "One devilfish, as every pearl trader knows, will clean out a whole reef of oysters. I have seen how it will drop a stone with one arm into a shell and suck out the oyster with another. Thus it will feed all day with never a shell clamping shut on its arm. They have the cunning of devils. They are devils."

Whitell gaped and swallowed and swore. "You're lying. They have no cunning. They'll even start to swallow their own arms."

"They have the hunger of devils. That is why there are no pearl oysters left."

Whitell had no answer. He had seen the empty shells in the undersea garden of gorgonias, and so had Torch. But neither had taken this to mean that there were no live oysters on the whole reef. Windy Whitell still refused to believe it.

But the kahuna offered another argument. "Why else did the Japanese leave? Because there was a devilfish they must kill first? Would the Japanese give up for that when they hunt devilfish all over the sea? They dove here, and then they left. Would they leave pearls?"

No, Whitell had to admit to himself, they would not. He sank on a red hummock, settling in a heap as if his huge body had deflated as completely as his vision of sudden wealth. He had heard about the Japanese poachers. It proved what the kahuna said. This concession was worthless.

Whitell fumed and turned purple. His fortune in pearls dwindled in his imagination, giving way to a very tangible and immediate sum of money. He might owe the diver the preposterous sum of a hundred dollars Mex for killing a devilfish that any Japanese would have killed for a few sous.

That at least, if he had no fortune, was a matter to be considered. He turned from the witch doctor and crawled to the edge of the lagoon, staring into the blue shadows.

The diver was down there clinging to the bottom, his body like something waterlogged and drowned, rolling slightly with the slow perpetual movement of the sea ferns.

Windy Whitell's cigar fell from his mouth. Again the parrot, watching him

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one-eyed, hooted brokenly. Whitell could see the devilfish crawl out of its purple cave, then walk upright on three of its arms.

That was what made it look so enormous to the man who was under water.

TORCH HUBBARD waited in the garden of gorgonias which moved like a bed of flowers under a wind.

From this dense thicket of a sudden, a school of bright winged fish shot up like birds breaking from covert. They had seen it too—the serpent arm crawling into the garden.

As these beasts do in the hot season, the devilfish gave out a phosphorescent haze as it rolled along. It flared open slowly like a parachute so that to Torch Hubbard, twisting and looking upward, it seemed to have no definite size. It was infinite. And it brought such darkness that a fleeing sea mouse with its iridescent bristles leaped into a sudden contrast of light.

The kanakas said that the ghost of Tumuraifenua brought the night by holding down the sky with its tentacles. Torch Hubbard believed for that quick instant that this was true.

In the growing moment of darkness another one of those gorgeous snow-capped shells glowed as if of its own light. It pointed the way. It was a shining star. It reminded Torch that there was something priceless and lovely to be won.

But before he could win he must stay and fight this ghost. With a fury at his own fear, he decided that he had run away from enough things in his life. He waited until a tentacle reached down through the thicket of ferns, felt its way around his calf, then coiled itself snugly around his knee.

But whether he was a brave man or a fool, he could wait no longer than that. He swung his machete, half severed the tentacle, then jumped upward for the surface.

It happened slowly like the vision of a kava drinker where time does not exist. Moments stretched into an insane eternity so that the jump was a slow everlasting sailing through space.

He got to the surface with the beast clinging to his thighs. But his shoulders and arms were in free air now. He swung his machete again.

The beast burst into a furious writhing, fear and anger changing its color definitely from coral to gray. Partly out of water, its arms flayed the surface making that hissing sound which kanakas sing about and imitate with a swish of hula skirts. But this gave way to the steady whirring of the machete.

Abruptly the beast shriveled, paralyzed by one stroke at that part where the arms joined its head. This was the spot they call "the life." The tentacles sank, curling stiffly like a paralytic's fingers.

When Torch climbed over the coral reef he brought the dead octopus with him, although he didn't mean to. The double rows of suckers were congealed, clinging to him, so that he looked like some sort of a sea monster himself, a Caliban bred in the swampy mangroves of the lagoon.

The kanaka witch doctor let out a bird-like screech and went hobbling and stumbling toward the betel palms. With his dim eyes it was probable that he mistook Torch for the devil of his own invention, his own songs and *parapores*. He would not come back when Windy Whitell yelled for help. Nor would any of the natives.

There were some, however who came through the palms and mangroves to-

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wards the reef. And these were white: three men and a lean, wild-eyed girl.

Windy Whitell beckoned to them, screaming in a fat man's treble. He pointed to Torch who, having pulled the dead octopus from his loins, had lurched forward in a faint.

The man and the thing he had killed lay there very close to each other, two shapeless heaps. The slain devil was absurdly small, a shriveled, deflated thing with only three legs now. It was big enough as devilfish go, certainly no *octopus punctatus* of the deep Pacific. The "giant devil" which some of the kanakas had seen was a formation of coral which wavered in certain tides and in a certain momentary light.

One thing the white diver had accomplished anyway. He had lain a ghost.

TORCH HUBBARD found himself staring up at the dark forms of three men. One who was as brown and thatch-whiskered as a cocoanut was binding the wounds where the suckers had been pulled away from the living, human flesh.

Another face, like the rare sky-white coral of the lagoon, floated just above Torch. This was Molly Bartlett looking at him as she knelt in the sand. As if his thoughts had been uninterrupted since his last dive, he remembered she had sold her favorite shells.

"I found something for you—down there," he gasped through stretched gray lips. "A shell for your collection. I hid it under a palm branch."

She did not answer or move. But at this first sound of his voice, a fearful and triumphant look shone like sudden sunlight on her wet face.

"How did you get here?" he asked, realizing for the first time that she was a good way from home.

"I heard you'd really left for Yaws Island. I was frightened. I came with this trader and his men."

"You'll like the shell I found. Don't you want to see it? It's a beauty. It made me think of you. It made me remember what I had to do."

It was not until the whiskered old trader had finished binding his wounds, that she got up and hunted for the shell. Torch's eyes followed her, even though someone was talking to him.

"Look here, Hubbard, I got something to tell you."

Torch's eyes roved dizzily, coming back from the girl to a large fattish hulk standing against the sun.

"You've got more guts than I ever dreamed of having," the fat man said. "You deserve more'n a hundred dollars. What you want is to get a job so you and that little lady can get married. That's what you told me, ain't it?" His lips wobbled to a friendly grin.

Torch tried to fix his eyes on the blobs of putty which made Windy Whitell's mouth.

"I saw that fight, all of it," the mouth was saying. "And I'm going to reward you. Instead of giving you a hundred dollars I'm giving you the concession. You can have all the pearls you find."

Molly had come back. She faced Windy Whitell and studied that crooked smile. "You'll pay this man, I hope."

"Well look," Whitell said. "I was just talking to one of the natives. They won't dive even now. Whoever has this concession will have to do his own diving and I'm too old for that."

"Cut it out!" the brown-bearded trader snapped. "The kid's all torn to pieces and you offer him a job which means he's got to dive again!"

"I'm giving him a chance to get rich,

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ain't I? He wants something to support a wife, don't he?"

Molly Bartlett sat down by Torch, facing him so she could look at him hard. "Did you hear what he said?"

TORCH stared back at her helplessly. He saw that same searching, measuring look in her eyes. She was letting him make the decision.

If he took the pay he would have to deposit it with the Administrative Office, which meant the would be on the beach again. If he accepted the reef—well, he would have a job, but his flesh cringed at the thought.

He knew the girl was thinking of all this. It was in her hot anxious gaze. She was waiting to see if he still had nerve enough to keep on going.

Without taking his eyes from her, he said, "I don't want his money. I've got to grub this reef for what it's worth."

He expected confidently that she would object, but she looked up to Whitell. "Write it down," she said in a cool, smart voice. "Two of us will sign it as witnesses."

Whitell gave a huge grin as he tore a leaf from his notebook and wrote. When the transaction was finished he lit a fat Manila cigar and puffed comfortably. He felt like passing cigars around but this was contrary to his habit. His brand cost money.

The girl still knelt by Torch, so close to him that there was just enough space for her to place that shell which she had unwrapped from its hiding sheath of palm fronds. Snow white, rounded whorls with frilled varices caught all the light of the blue sky as they had caught the fainter light under water. Now, in the sun, the shell was crowned with what looked like frost.

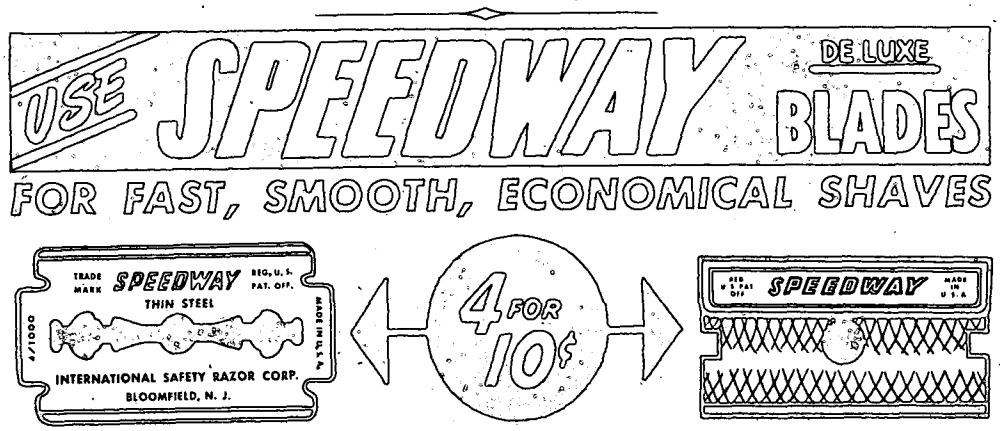
She whispered. "Torch, where did you find this?"

"Down there, deep," he said puzzled. "It was before the devilfish came for me."

She said, "It's a winding-stair shell, a royal wentle-trap they call it. There aren't a dozen perfect ones in the world. I don't know how much money it's worth: a fortune to you anyway."

He tried to get up, but his head sank back dizzily, his eyes clinging to her in an attempt to steady his mind. He tried to think, as he circled in a merry-go-round, just how many of those shells he had seen in that haunted water.

It was like a real merry-go-round now, what with a parrot laughing in wild syncopation to the beating of his blood.



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LEGENDS OF THE LEGIONARIES

ORIGINS OF THE CUSTOMS AND SAYINGS OF THE FIGHTING-MEN : by W·A·WINDAS

◦CHRISTMAS TREES◦

Were introduced to America by America's enemies. The Hessian mercenaries in the British army, when celebrating Xmas at Trenton (just before their handsome walloping by Washington) used their traditional Christmas trees, which were the first to be seen on this continent.

◦BLACK LINE *in* LACE◦

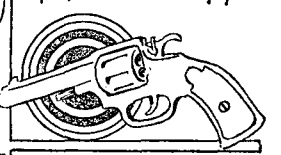
British regiments wearing a black line in the gold lace of their dress uniforms, do so in memory of the deaths of Sir John Moore at Corunna, and General Wolfe at Quebec.

◦SOLDIERS AFLOAT◦

Until 1546, navies were commanded by generals, and ships by military men. Soldiers had the deciding voice in all matters, save only the handling of the ship.

◦REVOLVERS◦

Invented in the 15th century revolvers were similar to those of modern days. They did not function well however, owing to inexact workmanship, so did not become popular for many years.



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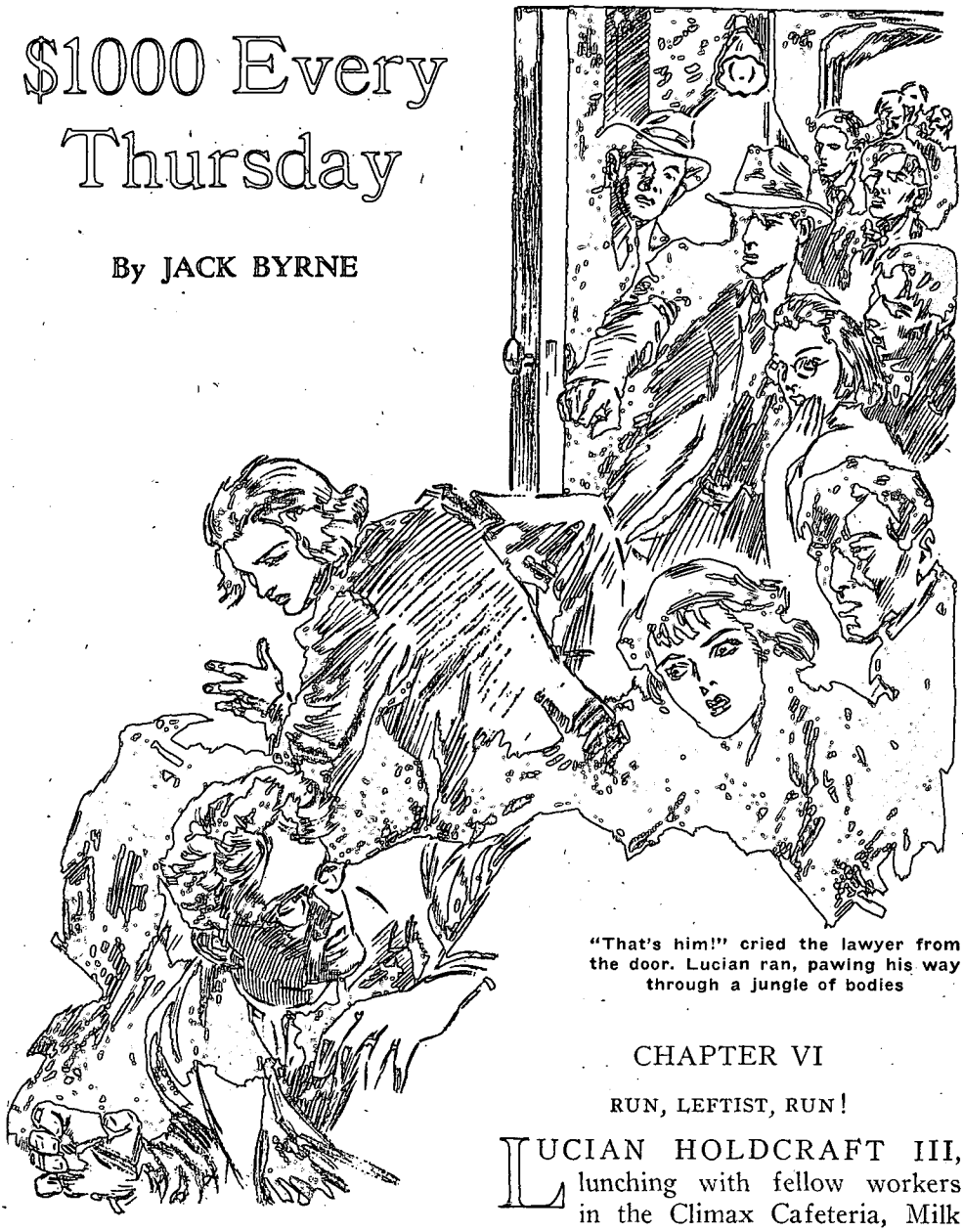
$1000 Every Thursday

By JACK BYRNE



"That's him!" cried the lawyer from the door. Lucian ran, pawing his way through a jungle of bodies

Will there be a third term for you know who? Will the pension-planners take a trick? No matter; get on the gravy train now for the Katy Belle and the greatest handout in history. And remember—you can't take it with you

CHAPTER VI

RUN, LEFTIST, RUN!

LUCIAN HOLDCRAFT III, lunching with fellow workers in the Climax Cafeteria, Milk Street, Boston, raised his eyes to the white clock on the wall.

"That's right," said one of his companions. "We better scram. Old Windy bellyaches all afternoon if you're three minutes late."

"Look here, Dietrich," said Lucian

This story started in last week's Argosy

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THE DEALERS

JONAS G. GALWAY, tycoon who is out to beat the income tax, the brain-trusters, and the pension-schemers by reviving the KATY BELLE mining corporation, paying to the stockholders or their heirs $1,000 every Thursday.

SUSAN GALWAY, his beautiful and charmingly impudent niece, the only living person who can browbeat old J. G. She is helping with the Katy Belle arrangements, and keeping a slightly possessive eye on

THOMAS HARWOOD, young attorney who has undertaken to find bona-fide candidates for the Katy Belle handout. Susan Galway has him on a limb: because of her granddaddy's millions he is trying (pretty ineffectively) to keep her out of his mind and out of his hair.

THE JACKPOT

MRS. JULIA O'LEARY, widow of Blackie O'Leary (who had been made secretary of the corporation as a gag, because he couldn't write his name). Harwood and Susan found her working as chamber maid in a New York hotel and paid her off; after which she gave a party and properly paid off the five grown children who had deserted her.

LUCIAN HOLDCRAFT III, descendant of another Lucian Holdcraft who ran a livery barn—and was frozen out of the original Katy Belle Corporation. Harwood has succeeded in picking up young Holdcraft's trail and hopes to make contact with him soon—with several thousand dollars in surprise money.

DR. JOHN PAGE PICKERING: a man to watch. Easiest of all the original stockholders to find, he is by all odds the most mysterious; for he has neither acknowledged nor cashed any of the thousand-dollar checks sent him so far.

Holdcraft, "that's what I've been telling you. Let him yowl. At one-thirty a section of the robot platoon clanks out of the factory. They gulp down the handfuls of swill that their miserable salaries afford. In thirty minutes, to the second, they must goosestep back again. Is that a way to live? Is that what God gave us brains for?"

Dietrich rose. "All I know is it took me six tough months to find this job and I'm not gonna lose it just for the privilege of hearing you shoot off your mouth."

Lucian Holdcraft followed along rebelliously. "In an organized society," he disserted, "there will always be work for all. That must be the cornerstone of any advanced civilization. Our right to work is inalienable.

"Moreover, why should intelligent, able young men have to bend their necks to a dried-up old hasbeen like Winthrop? Why should he drag down more than the four of us combined for merely snooping over our shoulders?"

With similar logic and rhetoric he beguiled the way to the Mammoth Store—Pay Cash and Save—where a service elevator hoisted them to the fifth floor. Here the frosty eye of Mr. Winthrop, section manager, checked them in their duties among the men's haberdashery, furnishings and sporting goods.

Lucian engaged himself with a fat man and the dollar forty-nine shirts and was soon engulfed in the Saturday bargain whirl.

It was like a game of basketball with

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twenty to a side, he used to relate to the fellows at the Club. You reached and pivoted and backed and bumped, all by instinctive mechanics, and finally you put yourself in a sleepwalker's trance that lasted until the referee's whistle blew. Tonight the whistle would be late. The Mammoth Store was open until eight on Saturdays.

As a matter of fact there was little physical or mental exertion required for the selling of shirts. It was a soft job, really, except that it was so completely dull. The customers were all the same guy, in various neck sizes, except that some liked blue stripes, some liked pink, and some preferred the sportsman's collar.

As a member of the Club you were supposed to have a fellow sentiment for these customers. Solidarity was the word—or, as Lou Manzini put it, "the compassion of the halt for the crippled and the lame"—but it's tough to extend the unseen hand of brotherhood to thickheads so dumb they can't even ask for what they want to buy.

"No," you said, "this doesn't come in silk for one forty-nine."

"But I'm sure you had the right change when you left the counter."

"Straighten your stock, straighten your stock"—That was old Winthrop.

"Don't you know your own neck-size?" you said.

"It shrank, I tell you. Don't argue with me, young fellow. And I won't go trotting around to any complaint department. I bought it here and here I stay until I get my money back."

"Don't let those empty boxes pile up." Old Winthrop again. "Fire laws, fire laws."

DIETRICH was across the aisle among the more expensive shirts, working the so-called Racquet Club beat. When Winthrop signaled to Lucian, during a lull, he went over with alacrity to attend the stray customer there.

"You coming tonight?" he managed to whisper to Dietrich in passing.

A shrug.

"It'll be a big meeting," Lucian continued when opportunity came. "Some guys from the Students' Brigade: all about China and the war."

"That's no war," said Dietrich. "Any women?"

"Plenty. Be there about nine."

Dietrich was a tough customer, but Lou Manzini had put it up to the rank and file that each one had to bring in a new prospective member every week. The class war, as Lou pointed out, never paused for armistice. Each member was a soldier with words his bullets and knowledge his sword. Each new recruit today was a potential strength of ten in the battles of tomorrow.

"There you are," he muttered to Dietrich as he wrapped up a sale. "Those two are what I mean. Hah-vud men. You couldn't buy one of their overcoats with a month's salary. Look at 'em—never done a day's work in their lives. They live on the fat of the land by right of the money their grandfathers stole. They exist on the sweat of thousands like us and think we ought to thank them for the husks they toss our way. Why don't you go and kiss the hem of their trousers, vassal?"

"So what?" said Dietrich. "I'm getting my three meals."

"Yes, and so does a cow. But is a cow's life something for a man to live? That's the trouble: the masses have been victimized so long that crawling in the mud seems a natural state."

He quoted Lou Manzini: "They complacently accept the false values of their exploiters and perpetuate their

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own peonage. That's the vicious circle."

"Holdcraft!" old Winthrop barked.

"Okay, okay," said Lucian, returning to the bargain treadmill where he scourged himself for a while with mental estimates of what share of his sales today would be dropped into the moneybags of some bloated banker.

At four o'clock they came around with the weekly insult. Eighteen bucks; now what can you do, what can you buy with that? For eighteen paltry dollars they drove you, sweated you, snarled at you, sucked the youth and strength from your body and finally tossed you out on the slag heap of public charity.

Lucian gripped the pay envelope and looked around for Dietrich. Now was the time to drive home another nail with an appropriate gesture of disgust. His eye fell upon the nearby necktie section however, and he thrust the envelope hastily into his pocket.

The lean man in the gray velours—spying on him again!

From Mr. Winthrop Lucian received permission to leave his station.

You were allowed five minutes, no more, in the retiring room, and five minutes of additional cerebration cast no helpful light on the riddle of the man in the gray velours. For three days he had been nosing around, and there could be no doubt that Lucian Holdcraft was the object of his attentions. Was he a fink? Or was he—

Lucian swallowed hard.

SEE Lucian Holdcraft III, corn-haired, loose-jointed, serious of visage behind the portholes of the glasses he wore for store work; a cynic, an intellectual, and at the age of twenty-two a disillusioned adventurer who had dedicated his future to warfare against the world's wrongs.

Back in Michigan they called him Skinny and admitted he was the best debater they ever had at Jackson High. (Note Silver Medal Award, State Oratorical Contest, '34 and '35.)

They knew him for a man of action too. Some fellows would have stayed on the farm if their stepfathers refused to send them to college, but Lucian knew that only a coward takes a licking lying down. There was a C C C for those of hardier breed where a man could learn to live on his own.

When it developed that life in the Conservation Corps held much the same as a farmer's lot, except that the food was not so good nor the beds so soft—well, a courageous soul could still turn to the vast frontier of the open sea.

Six trips on a tanker out of Gulfport had sprayed a film of oil on that illusion, though, and landed Lucian in Providence with a rudimentary knowledge of sea-lawyering and the nickname of Skipper. He had been working in Boston now for three months.

Three months is a long time. It was hardly likely that the Providence police were still hunting the men who beat up the scabs and policemen in that little affray of the docks. Nobody had been hurt really bad. Lucian's crowd had been outnumbered four to one—or two to one, anyway, or at least outnumbered—and they wouldn't have used their blackjacks if the police hadn't tried to get tough.

No, the man in the gray velours wasn't the law.

Just thinking of the fellow's weasel face, though, was enough to give Lucian a headache. There were black spots dancing before his eyes, he told Mr. Winthrop, and his head was throbbing so badly that he had to go home, docked salary or not.

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He took the subway to his furnished room, washed up and changed his shirt, and a meal in the lunch wagon cured him completely.

It was when he stopped at the pool room a minute, on his way to the Club, that he happened to look across the street and see the lean face, the gray velours again.

Lucian left the pool hall by a rear door and traversed three alleys on the way. He was unobserved as he let himself in at the back entrance of the Club. It was lucky, he thought, that Lou Manzini had let him have a private key made only last week.

THE articles of incorporation had been made out in the name of the *Young People's League for Freedom and the Advancement of World Democracy,* and some of the handbills they passed out had stated that here was a congenial meeting place for the expression of liberal ideals and ideas.

Headquarters was a long ill-lighted loft room on the floor above an abandoned bowling academy. The furnishings were plain and rugged, as befitted a temple of the higher thought, except for certain sections of the wall on which amateur muralists had wreaked their talents.

Someone had contributed a pingpong table in the long ago but its back had been broken and now it served as a catchall for discarded newspapers, pamphlets, and an accumulation of dog-eared tomes. There were camp chairs and benches and a variety of palsied tables scattered about.

At the front, where the light was better, was a beaverboard cubicle that housed a desk, a swivel chair, a steel filing cabinet, and usually Lou Manzini.

The hour was too early for any of the really important members. Lucian passed a rear table where a highschool crowd was still excited about last week's feat of daubing *Comrades, Rise!* and other slogans on the school steps. Kid stuff, and Lucian gave them his disdain.

Another bunch played twenty-one for matches—by-laws notwithstanding—and there were six or eight at what Lou called the "discussion table." Kantrowicz, who had been on the freshman football team at Brown back in the stone age, was talking about socialized money.

(Kantrowicz was older than most, and had a broken nose, and said to people, "Are you a college man?" One year at a boob trap like Brown had made him an intellectual yet.)

"As long as money creates money," he was saying, "we're at the mercy of those who control the money. On the other hand, if we destroy the artificial medium of exchange, gold, and substitute an essential commodity, labor, as the basis of all commerce, we immediately return the wealth to the hands of those who create the wealth."

"That's Henry George," said someone. "It's the old energy dollar gag. That's been exploded. The Trotsky experiments—"

"Lou around?" Lucian asked.

They glanced at him without interest. "Finance isn't the fundamental problem though," Barney Jensen said. "That can be controlled. It's the machines that are eating us alive. The history of tomorrow will be written by skilled technicians . . ."

Lucian had heard this speech before. He went to the victrola and looked in the record cabinet. A flat-heeled bespectacled girl, one of the highschool crowd, said, "Lou locked them up in the office. He says they're always steal-

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ing 'em. We ought to have a radio."

"Oh sure," said Lucian airily. "Then we could keep right up to date on Father Coughlin and Little Orphan Annie. The radio is more reactionary than Hollywood even."

People kept coming in, new faces among them. A big meeting tonight, all right. There was a girl with the WPA bunch—a model, somebody said—who looked interesting. Lucian was edging over towards her when he heard his name called. He went to the door and it was Dietrich, from the store.

"You need bloodhounds and a road map to find this joint," he complained. He looked around. "And when you find it whatta you got? Some dump."

"We haven't been here long," Lucian said. "It'll be fixed up fine when we get a little cash ahead. An extra hundred bucks or so, Lou says, and we could move to a bigger place."

"Who's this Lou you keep yapping about? What makes him such a big noise?"

"There he is now," Lucian said. He had spotted Lou Manzini and Conchita as they entered. "Listen, Dietrich, you'll have to excuse me a minute." He led his guest to the discussion table, mumbled a series of names and made a swift retreat.

TWO or three of the others had followed Lou and Conchita into the office. The big highschool guy with the M on his chest was beefing again about dues. Ten cents a month was enough, he maintained, some of the kids just couldn't spare a quarter.

Lou waved his hands and laughed. He had a great laugh. "Personally," he said, "I'd cut the bite to a flat nothing a year and forget it. But I don't run the national organization, you know. Make your complaint in writing, if you feel that way about it, and we'll send it on to headquarters."

The big guy gave Conchita some bills and change, still grumbling, and she entered the amount in her book. She winked at Lucian.

Lucian nodded casually. He had been in love with Conchita for three months now, a love of desperation which must forever remain unavowed and unrequited. To this he had resigned himself, even to the extent of burning the diary in which he had jotted down some of his earlier emotions.

He said, "Say Lou, can I see you privately a moment?"

Lou said, "Privately, is it? I get as much privacy as a hippopotamus in a bird bath. What's on *your* mind?"

Lucian understood. The whole crowd was always on Lou's tail, bellyaching about this or that. Some of the guys didn't realize what Lou was giving up for the League. Here was a man who graduated from N. Y. U., practically a Phi Beta Kappa too, who was giving up the big-money jobs he could easily grab off simply because, as he said himself, he had a sense of service. Lucian knew Lou's sacrifice and could consequently forgive the momentary irritation.

He leaned across the desk and whispered. "It's that Providence caper. I saw that same guy again today, following me."

Lou pressed his nose flat with the palm of his hand and turned to Conchita. "The little green men are after him again," he said mockingly.

He faced Lucian. "You fellows give me a pain. You all want to be Tom Mooneys and lecture-tour from coast to coast on how much you've suffered for the cause. It's imagination, I tell you. That Providence thing is dead and buried."

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He glanced at his wristwatch, straightened his tie. "Did you bring your bunch along?"

"I only got one of them," Lucian confessed. "I'm sorry I let you down, Lou. I really tried—"

Lou groaned. "I know. Boy, what a bunch of alibi artists I got." He raised his eyes to Lucian's and spoke in his frank and honest way: "If had one man, Holdcraft," he said, "one man to stand shoulder to shoulder with me, we could do a job here that would open the eyes of the whole country.

"The time is ripe. People are awakening. The underfed and underprivileged are seeking a way out of the wilderness of their discontent. We know the true way, we can show them the path, but we can't expect miracles unless we're willing to work to make them happen.

"We need membership, Holdcraft. We need money, the sinews of war. Do you realize what an additional hundred memberships would mean? Do you know what we could accomplish with a few extra hundred dollars?"

LUCIAN had a vision. He saw a great hall where the cognoscenti gathered. At one end you mounted three steps and faced the twin offices of Louis Manzini and Lucian Holdcraft III, co-directors of the National Bureau for the Promulgation of the Truth.

Here came the aches and ills of the world to be cured. The weary and forsaken limped up the three steps and descended them in a few moments revitalized, chins up, stride assured, their faces lambent with the glory of a new determination.

"Can't you see what I mean, Holdcraft?" Lou was ending.

Conchita changed her smile to a blank stare as Lucian glanced at her. He nodded. "I'm sorry, Lou—honest. I—that is, I had a run of luck in the eight-ball game last night. I picked up a little something for the Fund."

He separated the three dollar bills from the ten and the five and put them on Lou's desk. "Next week I'll have the whole shirt department here, so help me!"

Lou gripped his fingers. Lou clapped his shoulder. "That's the stuff, Lucian!" he cried. "Now you're talking, boy. Remember, it's tomorrow's history you're making."

Conchita had palmed the three dollars and was writing in her little book.

"Don't worry about that Providence business," Lou said heartily. "We can handle whatever happens there. The boys from the Brigade will be here in an hour and I want you to be sure and meet 'em. Great guys. They know what it is to suffer for a cause. You better go out and circulate now. Keep talking things up. Tell 'em the Students' Brigade will be here in an hour."

Lucian found Dietrich leaning against the wall. Dietrich said, "When Hedy Lamarr and Garbo pass by be sure and point 'em out. You're practically knee-deep in beauty here, ain'tcha?"

"The really important people don't come till later," Lucian explained. "Bart Fowler will be here, the man they tarred and feathered in Gastonia. And the fellows from the Brigade will have a flock of pictures, the real thing."

"I can hardly wait. Who's the slick-haired Valentino inside, the guy with all the wavy gestures?"

"That's Lou. She—the girl—you remember I told you about Conchita? You wouldn't say she was hard to look at, would you?"

"Some like 'em Spanish and some

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like spinach. What does she do except go around looking wise?"

"She's a newspaper woman," Lucian said, which strictly speaking was true. It happened that Conchita was merely one of the voices that solicited classified ads by telephone right now, but she was one of the most vigorous workers in the Guild and it wouldn't be long until she was transferred to a real job. She had edited the school paper at Brockton High and everybody admitted she had a nose for news.

"What's that dough you were handing out in there?" Dietrich wanted to know. "Who gets that?"

Lucian frowned. "Naturally there are bills to meet. There's the national monthly assessment. Conchita keeps track of everything in the book."

"Yeah, but who handles the cash? Who audits the profit and loss?"

"Well, Lou, I guess—"

"Boy," said Dietrich, rubbing his fat hands, "if there's any more jobs like that kicking around you can count me in—yes and with two pair of pants."

IT was becoming increasingly obvious that Dietrich was not promsing material for membership in the Club. Belly-minded, Lou would classify him. He had no more class-consciousness than a Japanese beetle. Lucian changed the subject:

"How's the discussion table going? I'll bet you heard some real talk there?"

"It was fine," Dietrich acknowledged. "Some of those boys are just lousy with ideas. Take that big guy with the prizefight nose—"

"That's Kantrowicz. He played football at—"

"He's got a slick scheme, all right," Dietrich said. "You throw all the money away. Jobs for everybody, no more taxes to pay. At the end of the week you get a certificate which shows how many hours you worked and states the energy value thereof. When you want a dozen eggs you go to a farmer or a government store—"

"Yes, yes, I know," said Lucian hastily.

"The beauty of it," Dietrich went on, "is that only the government can use money to make money. They finance everything and use the profits to build schools and museums and teach people the better things of life. The national resources, see, are used directly for the benefit of the people. No private ownership, no profiteers—"

"The only trouble with that—" Lucian began.

"Yeah, that's what the other guys said. One skinny kid hollered it was antiquated Marxist folderol. I thought Marx was a big shot around a place like this."

"Marx isn't exactly modern," Lucian said. "Too theoretical. Personally, I'm in favor—"

"Another claimed it was Upton Sinclair, that it stank of Trotsky. A guy named Jensen was ready to fight about it. He said it was glorified state socialism, like Hitler's putting out. I thought for a minute they'd swing on each other."

"Well," said Lucian, "there's bound to be differences of opinion."

Dietrich nodded sympathetically. "Sure. The only thing is, I'd hate to have these geniuses squabbling over the table where I'm trying to eat my meals in peace. I'd probably end up with a nice crisp lettuce leaf and a hunk of good advice for dessert."

Lucian was preparing a fine sarcasm that would put Dietrich in his place when he heard his name shouted above the din of voices. The Brigade arriv-

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ing, he thought, as he wormed his way towards the entrance. A couple of strangers, well dressed, were chatting with the doorkeeper.

"Okay," Lucian called. "What's up?"

"That's him!" a harsh voice cried. "There he is—that's Holdcraft!"

With face triumphant, pointing his skinny arm—the unrelenting ferret in the gray velours!

CHAPTER VII

THAT MAN AGAIN

LUCIAN ran. He pawed his way through a jungle of bodies, skidding, tripping, but never stopping his rush for the exit at the rear.

Above the squeals and shrieks of the girls he heard them shout his name, and he was vaguely aware that Lou Manzini and some of the strongarm squad were blocking the strangers off for parley.

Maybe Lou will realize now, he thought as he took the back stairs four at a clip, that some true visionaries could be men of action as well. Maybe Conchita, coming by stealth to his hideout, would one day know—

He ran in the alley shadows, his feet directing his brain. After six blocks of dark turnings he found the shelter of a brickyard and crouched behind a friendly fence to catch his breath. A dog began to yap nearby and was silenced by a shout from an upflung window.

They would get him eventually, he knew. The law was too long-armed, too many-eyed. They would jail him, and with fist and rubber hose the inquisition would start. Great drafts of castor oil such as the Facists used might purge him of strength but not of indomitable will. Lou and the rest would have a chance to see the stuff of which Lucian Holdcraft was made.

Or maybe—he wiped sweat from his forehead—he could sign aboard some freighter for far away. Senegal, Australia—blow-piping for forbidden birds of paradise in a steaming Guiana swamp. . . .

He became aware of the night's chill and his cramped legs. He ventured forth again and decided to test the freedom of a quiet street. No bluecoat called him halt. If he had a hat to mask his eyes, he decided boldly, he would try one of these lunch wagons for a cup of hot coffee.

His feet were taking him instinctively towards his furnished room. It was unthinkable that watchful eyes would not be patrolling the house, but a wary and detailed scrutiny of the street revealed nothing untoward. No parked car with curtains drawn; not even a square-toed sentinel lurking in a doorway.

Lucian mustered a casual whistle as he approached the remodeled brownstone. He wished he had a cigarette to puff and a nonchalant cane to twirl. He went up the steps with more than his usual haste, it was true, but this occasioned no shouting or alarms.

The sly fox had left the baffled hounds behind, it seemed, to bay disconsolate at the moon.

His room was on the second floor rear. There was a slight weakness at his knees as he inserted his key in the lock but otherwise he felt fine. He hummed a little tune as the latch clicked behind him and he thumbed the light switch.

"That's him, that's Holdcraft!" said the voice of the man in the gray velours.

Lucian choked and sagged against the door.

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THERE were three of them. A big bald man was sitting on the bed and a dark fellow was smiling. This man said something that Lucian couldn't understand and came forward from the window.

"All right," Lucian croaked. "You got me, Cossacks. But I won't talk, you hear. I refuse to answer on advice of counsel. I demand—"

"We explained the situation to your landlady," said this dark fellow, "and she gave us permission to wait in your room. I hoped to get you at the store today but the fog washed out all the planes and I had to come by train. I'm sorry about the misunderstanding at your—er—club, but I was able to outline the situation for your friend Mr. Manzini and he suggested this address. Now Mr. Holdcraft—"

Lou, thought Lucian desperately. Lou had squealed.

"My name is Harwood," this dark fellow said pleasantly. "Here's my card. As trust officer for the liquidation of the Kaybee Corporation, assignee of the former Katy Belle Enterprises, I have the pleasure to inform you . . ."

Lucian listened limply. As the voice continued it became fainter and fainter until it shrank to no more than a buzzing whisper from a vast yonderness.

The walls of the room began to shudder and the floor became the deck of the tanker *Gulf Girl* in a choppy sea off the Carolina coast.

Lucian tried to gulp a deep breath but realized the effort was futile. The wall withdrew its support from his back and he sat down on emptiness with no further interest in the proceedings.

LATER Lucian had a hazy recollection of a taxi and the trip to the Tremont-Plaza Hotel. He came to understand that the bald man was head of the Acme Agency and the man in the gray velours—he wasn't ferret-faced, more rabbity really on close inspection—was a fellow who traced missing debutantes and lost heirs and such. (He didn't know a soul in Providence.)

There were sandwiches and coffee in a big suite, and this Thomas Harwood turned out to be one of the swellest guys you ever met.

They sent down for a suit of pajamas and Lucian spent the night in the extra bed.

But it was almost noon the next day, with Lucian munching the last of the breakfast toast, before he fully realized the golden vistas that the happenings of the night before had opened.

There on a table were the multicolored papers he had signed in a notary's presence. There were the tidy blue checks. ONE THOUSAND DOLLARS: the sum was blocked in big red letters. And above it his name: Lucian Holdcraft III.

"A thousand dollars every Thursday," he said.

Harwood nodded. "By the way, I wanted you to have a good sleep but the office just sent up these notifications of telephone calls. Your friend Mr. Manzini—three of them, marked urgent. And a lady, Miss Conchita—is it Farrar?—is waiting in the lobby. There's also our little session with the press when you feel strong enough."

"A thousand smackers a week," said Lucian.

"It's a lot of money for a young fellow," Harwood agreed. "What are you going to do with it, Lucian?"

Lucian hesitated. "Do you think I'm too old to go to college? I could be a lawyer like you, couldn't I, if I wanted to?"

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"Or a doctor or a tree-surgeon or an efficiency engineer. Why not? You've still got your life before you."

"On the other hand"—Lucian pondered. "Say, Mr. Harwood, would you mind if I went back with you to New York? I could pick up some clothes there and look around . . ."

"But I'm leaving right away. I'm saving an hour for the newspapers and taking a train at three o'clock."

"That's okay." Lucian laughed. "It won't take me long to pack."

"But your friends, Lucian. That crowd at the Club almost tore the place down when the news leaked out last night. I had to explain to Manzini that you had come into an inheritance, you see, to prevent a brewing disorder. He seems like a fine bright chap, Manzini. Said he was a special friend of yours."

"That cheap Valentino," said Lucian, gazing from the window.

"There was also a dark girl, very attractive. Conchita, I suppose. Why don't you have her come up for a minute now?"

"That Spanish—" Lucian peered forth upon the Sunday traffic below. With ruthless hand he turned a page in his book of life forever. "That Spanish omelet," he said, and wished that Dietrich could hear.

"You know, Mr. Harwood," he said after a moment, "I was thinking about back home. You know—Jackson, in Michigan. There's Andy Ellis runs the Men's Shop. Andy's getting along. Now I've had some retail experience here in Boston, and it seems to me—"

"An excellent idea," said Harwood.

"A man who owns a store is looked up to," Lucian went on. "He has a fine chance to meet people, and next to being a lawyer I guess that's the best way to get into politics. I'm a good talker, Mr. Harwood, and I know all the farmers out there. In a couple of years I'll be old enough . . ."

He contemplated the horizon, enwrapt.

"What are your political affiliations, Lucian?" Harwood asked idly. "Are you a Laborite, a New Dealer—"

"Oh no." Lucian shook his head. "A Democrat couldn't be dogcatcher back home. Our family's always voted the straight Republican ticket."

The telephone tinkled. "The gentlemen of the press coming up," Harwood announced.

Lucian Holdcraft fingered his collar. "All right," he said, "but if any of them are from Providence you tell them they can't take pictures." His aspect was grave. "Frankly, Mr. Harwood, there are some episodes in a man's life that he finds it more convenient to forget about."

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WHEN the doctors had made their morning departure, and even while the maledictions still sizzled in their wake, Susan entered the chamber of J. G. Galway, that long-suffering man.

She said, "The Ladies' Aid Society wants to know if you are attending the annual Strawberry Festival and Tea Dance at the Pavilion this afternoon."

The tycoon was robed in right royal purple and propped in a bed that would have accommodated a minor sultan's family clambake. "It doesn't hurt so much these days," he said mildly, "but I have to keep hollering at those fellows to keep 'em on their toes. Doctors! They'll amputate your gizzard if you give 'em half a chance."

"Fosdick says—"

"Damn Fosdick. What does the old fool want?"

"Now, now," she warned. "I'm no

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high-priced specialist; you don't have to bully me. Fosdick has compiled a fine set of clippings from the leading independent Sunday journals and thought you might be interested."

"Oh, all right. Go ahead."

The editors of the Atlanta *News-Dispatch,* according to Susan, herewith served notice upon every Georgian legislator that a vote for the Wheelock Bill, or any other pension grab, would be a knife-stab in the bowed back of a Southland already driven to her kness by cruel adversity.

The editors were preparing a permanent box for the front page, furthermore, with the word *Traitors!* black at the top of it. The names of Judas Iscariot, Benedict Arnold and others had been set in type beneath. The box would be held open until the tally on the Wheelock Bill was taken, and would thereupon be filled out with the names of such Southern members of congress as were venal, besotted or maniac enough to vote "Aye."

"Find out who wrote that," J. G. ordered. "Got a good sharp tongue in his head, whoever he is."

The Seattle *Advance* recalled the familiar story of the goose that laid the golden eggs. American Business was that goose, and was pictured as such in an adjoining cartoon.

The readers were doubtless familiar with recent news stories which related how the stockholders of a company, long believed defunct, were now receiving $1,000 per week from past accumulations. It was true that the amount might be apocryphal, but there was nothing exceptionally outlandish in such a situation.

The fundamentals of trade and commerce demanded a return for those investors who used their savings wisely. But government was not a business. The dividends of citizenship were peace and security, not a fabulous livelihood scattered from an indiscriminate hand . . .

"Enough of that," said J. G. Galway. "It's hash. What else?"

A Philadelphia paper joined hands with a Denver gazette in coupling mention of the Wheelock Bill with the payments of $1,000 every Thursday by an unnamed business concern. At this point they parted company.

Whereas the Denver writer denounced the Wheelock Atrocity as a raid upon the national resources by the ism-drunk radicals of the city slums, the commentator from the City of Brotherly Love explained concisely how the cotton-bloated solons of the South had combined with the silver-dazzled Western clique to back Wheelock's Folly and scatter the plunder of the cities among the hungry have-nots of bayou and backwoods.

"We could probably straighten the whole thing out just dandy if those two could get together," Susan said. "Can you bear more?"

"Later. I'll look 'em over later."

He chuckled. "I'll bet those fellows down in Washington were wishing they hadn't monkeyed with the buzz-saw. Naturally they're dodging a vote but they'll have to face the problem when they draft a platform. That third-term talk's kind of died down, hasn't it? Yessir, we'll scare those roosters so doggone bad the name of Wheelock will make 'em shudder in their graves."

"Poem," said Susan.

"Congress attention:
Pension
We won't mention."

"Funnffh," was his comment. "That Harwood's doing a good neat job. A smart young fellow. He'll get places. Is he back from Boston yet?"

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"He hasn't done so much about your old friend Doctor Pickering, has he?" Susan asked. "It's almost a month now and nothing's happened. What about that?"

J. G. wrinkled his nose. "You let Doc alone. I—uh—if he has to be handled I'll do it myself. He's a queer kind of fellow. I remember one time this Mexican broke his leg. Fell off a ledge in the worst storm you ever saw. Well, Doc Pickering—"

A discreet tap was made upon the door. "What is it?" demanded the Galway roar.

"A telegram, sir. For Miss Susan, sir. We thought perhaps—"

"I hope I haven't won the sweepstakes again," Susan said, thumbing the yellow flap. "Doocid bother, dontcha know. I always—hmmmm."

"Well, what is it, what is it?"

"It's your Mr. Harwood reporting." She read: "Holdcraft matter concluded. Complete reports in mail. Message at my apartment indicates Minnick whereabouts Chicago. Departing next plane. Will telephone developments. Kindest regards."

"That's what I like about him," J. G. said. "Gets right after things."

Susan reread the message, expression grim. "Kindest regards!" she repeated, and a whilom expression of present company was called to mind. "That man!" she quoted. "Oh for his neck in my hands!"

CHAPTER VIII

GIRL IN A GILDED CAGE

IN FOUR hours and thirty-five minutes the luxurious flagships of Allied Airlines (advt.) hop from New York to Chicago where the Birdcage Club is not the swankiest spot in town. The cover is reasonable though, the steaks are good, and the liquor's the McCoy.

Artie Danvers' Gleecats play nightly for dancing and the floor show is topped by Veronica Vine, billed as the Beauty with the Blues.

Suppose it's six o'clock.

The doorman will be polishing down the brightwork at the entrance, a kiosk affair of gilded bamboo lattice—sure, like a birdcage. You catch on quick.

The checkroom is empty as last night's flask.

Three bartenders at the long bar and Single-o Dawson at the other. They are mostly studying the late race results and resting their dogs, except Single-o who is practicing legerdemain with a silver cartwheel.

The earlybird waiters are doing nothing much, just parking the body and lying about the big tips they picked up in the good old days.

The cook is blatting at his helpers and the kitchen is a goulash of noise. The bulk of the night's chores is now in the process as they prepare their staples for the steam tables.

Second floor front: The dressing rooms are deserted and the gambling hell above is as lifeless as the body in the belfry at Brassingham Manor, Little Belton, Wickshire, Hants., for which see page 36 of the newest mystery thriller.

In a second-floor room, rear, a blond lad pounds a piano. A woman is singing, not very well. She doesn't seem to know the song.

In a rich and showy office adjoining sits Major Wax. He's puffing a thin cigar and fondling the ivory elephant on his watchchain. His lips are fixed as if he thought of smiling.

So all right. It's six o'clock and the Birdcage. . . .

A man in a trim box coat and snapbrim hat looked the place over and

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came across to Single-o's pony bar. He ordered Scotch and a short soda.

"The cocktail trade is picking up," said Single-o, who was a card. "I thought you babies couldn't see till after dark, Lang."

Lang had a thin nose and a thin mustache. He sipped his highball. "What's new, Single? What do you hear?"

"Not a customer shot in the joint in over a week," was Single-o's stock reply. "What's by you?"

Lang studied the bar mirror. "Maybe nothing," he said, "maybe a sawbuck in your fist. There's a rumor going, a screwy tip I can't pin down. I don't know what it's about at all except it concerns Veronica." He shrugged. "So if you got, Single, and you want to give—"

Single-o worked his lips with a chewing motion. He glanced left and right. "Well, the Major turned down that radio job—"

"We printed that a week ago."

"We're moving out to the lake this summer."

"And Turkey Mike Donlin batted 433 in 1903. I know the facts of life."

Single-o grunted. "Okay, encyclopedia. How can I answer questions if you don't know what to ask?"

"That's the trouble," Lang said. "All I know is this hacker picked up a fare here last night. Two men. He didn't realize at first they were talking about Veronica. They said something about her right name and it costing some guy plenty to find her. Has she got a right name, do you happen to know?"

"She's the Major's storm and strife."

Lang pushed his glass impatiently. "Don't be such a dope."

"Why don't you ask the Major if you want to know so bad?" Single-o called after him. "Or ask V. V. herself up in the rehearsal room."

"I got a good notion to do it," Lang said.

Single-o laughed. "Yeah, I got a picture."

"All right," said Lang, "I will ask her." He slapped the brim of his hat and walked rapidly down the big room where waiters had begun to service the tables. He passed the dias where Artie Danvers would soon preside and approached a corner staircase. He took it two steps to the stride.

IN the rehearsal room the woman sang. The piano tried to spur her voice with tinkling runs but her tones would not lift above the rut of irresonance.

She said sharply, "It's no use, no use. I tell you I can't—"

"You're tired, Miss Vine."

"It's dead, it's gone, I never had a voice."

"Solway said you had the finest nonoperatic voice in America. You saw his article last week."

"Keep on playing." She gestured toward the wall. "You're a nice kid, Roy. How old are you?"

"I'm twenty-six."

"Yes, that's right, I've asked you that before. I'm thirty-one."

As if he didn't know.

He said, "I thought we might try those first bars in a minor, Miss Vine. You know, sort of—"

"You can call me Veronica here."

"All right. Here's how I meant."

She came to stand beside him. Her forearm touched against his coat as she watched the rhythm of his hands across the keys. She began to hum and to move her head with an almost imperceptible sway.

"You've got talent too, Roy. They

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all say that. Do you still study? Do you still want to write good music, those symphonies and things?"

"Sure." He smiled over his shoulder. "But it keeps me pretty busy here. Maybe I'll have some money ahead by fall."

"Keep playing." She glanced at the wall and sang a series of scales. "You study, Roy," said her husky whisper abruptly. "Study if you have to starve. It's worth the starving to have something real and good inside you, all your own."

He continued the soft chords and now her voice joined the music. Momentarily the piano guided her low experimentals but as her hand lifted to the blond lad's shoulder the tones came free and clear from a full throat. Even the flat harsh walls could not steal from that vital current of sound its cadenced melody.

"Yes yes yes—" the blond lad kept muttering, intent above the keys.

A clapping of hands intruded on the brief breathing silence at song's end. The man at the door said, "I hope I'm not interrupting, Miss Vine. I'll scram if you say the word. Remember me—Lang, *Daily Sun?*"

Veronica Vine put the piano between them. "What do you want?"

"Our music man," he lied, "said you might have a story. I've been hearing whispers—"

She jerked her head. "Did *he* send you?"

"The Major? Well, no.—I thought maybe you'd decided to take that Hollywood offer they've been talking about and I just dropped around—"

"YOU know better that this, Lang!" The voice had a dry buzzing bite, unpleasant to hear. Major Wax brushed past the reporter. He patted Veronica's hand, gently assurant, and linked her arm with his own.

In newspaper morgues of all the Midwest there was not one solo shot of Mr. A. (for Alexander) Perrin. Each pose showed him with Veronica Vine at his side and his lips about to smile.

As now. As now at 6:12 o'clock C.S.T. and a cold spring evening coming on.

"You know the little lady isn't to be bothered, Lang," said Major Wax. "All the boys know I won't have that. Who let you up here, Lang?"

"I was looking for you as a matter of fact, Major," Lang said. "I just happened to peek in here—"

Fingers womanly soft pressed Veronica's hand. "You mentioned Hollywood, Lang. I intend to give a general release as soon as the little lady decides. No favorites. But we can't talk business here where there's practicing to be done. Just step across to my office."

He raised Veronica's hand to his lips, a fleeting tenderness. "You will excuse us, my dear?"

He sat at his neat burnished desk and did not speak until the piano made music again beyond the wall. The reporter had removed his hat and was searching his pack for a special cigarette it seemed.

"Try a cigar, Lang." Major Wax waved at the humidor. "The point is there must be a system in all things. When I make rules I like to see them obeyed. I have always dealt fairly with the press—"

"But I just stuck my head in, Major. I was passing by, see, and I—"

"Please be sure that it doesn't happen again." White teeth, overly perfectioned, snipped the end from a cheroot. "I confess I was a bit upset to find you there. I was afraid you

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might mention the dinner and spoil the surprise."

The reporter shrugged.

"You didn't know? I thought the papers might have picked up word of it. There will be twenty or so, personal friends, after the midnight show. A surprise for the little lady on her eleventh anniversary."

"The lucky eleventh, eh Major?"

The lips almost smiled. "Columnists have been kind enough, many times, to point us out as an example of happy marriage in the profession. Yes, I guess it's been a lucky combination all around. The Club's a success, the little lady's at the top in her line—"

"They go no higher," said Lang, gripping his hat. "We'll—uh—congratulations, Major, and the best. I'm sorry I—"

"Forget it, Lang." Major Wax offered fingers limp and cool. "About that Hollywood matter: I'm not speaking for publication, understand, but I'm afraid I won't be able to persuade Veronica to accept. It would mean a separation, you see, and the little lady—"

The reporter laughed. "Sure, sure. Well, thanks Major."

Wave of a hand. "Why don't you drop around for the late show, Lang? I'm sure that some of the other boys will be here. Drop in and enjoy yourself, and be sure they send your check up to me."

"Hey, Lang!" called Single-o as the reporter was passing. "Hey, information, you any smarter than you was?"

"When I come back, stupid," Lang said, "my tab is on the house." He jerked an upward thumb. "Ask the great one. So when you see me at yon portal with fair maid at my side start dunking those magnums of champagne in the little pails of ice."

"Sure," said Single-o, "I got your special brand. La Mickey Finn, pink label, 1928."

THOMAS HARWOOD came to the Birdcage by taxi with a tall, rumpled man who yawned at frequent intervals. "I tell you we might just as well wait until tomorrow," said this weary individual. "This is my busy time here with the floorshow on. Tough job to see her any time, you ask me. You'd think she was at least a queen."

"I should have made that earlier plane," Harwood said. "Anyway, let's walk around the block while you tell me what I ought to know. You pretty sure this is the girl?"

They walked.

"This Stephen W. Minnick of yours," said the semi-somnambulist, "had three sons. One was killed in France with the Seventy-ninth—"

Harwood nodded impatiently.

"Yes, yes, I know the background. We're concerned with the surviving daughter of the second son who would seem to inherit in the direct line."

The tired man was named Marcum and his reputation as a private investigator was A-1. "That youngest Minnick boy was mighty interesting though," he said. "They hung him down in Alabama. We got the record of the trial and all."

"That's dandy, just dandy."

"Okay, boss. The girl we want was born in 1908, christened Doris Minnick. The family lived outside of Denver. She went to country school there and I got a graduation picture taken around 1922. It's back in the office. Blonde kid, pretty face, big for her age. I guess she was stage-struck, the way kids are. She left town with some cheap tab-show."

(The name of the troupe was Billy

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Updyke's Giddy Girlies, Doris Minnick could have told him. Six girls in the chorus, and the leading lady blind drunk half the time. Billy Updyke handled the comedy, Jew or Dutch. The juvenile was named Garson Grey and there never was a handsomer man, nor one more helpless, on the Pantages Circuit. He cried when anything went wrong. A button off his coat would puddle tears in his eyes.)

"Then she turns up in vaudeville," Marcum went on, "She called herself Vera Haines or something and was the legs in a magic act—you know, the girl in the opera lengths who chases the rabbits the professor lifts from the hat. She jumped the act in New Orleans."

"Well—"

"Well, she disappeared. Zingo—no more Vera Haines. But what I got you out here for, Mr. Harwood, it this: I brought three people who knew Vera Haines here to the Birdcage. Two said that Veronica Vine was their old friend Vera, one said she wasn't. *I* believe she's the same girl, and your trip's on me if I'm wrong."

"Fair enough," said Harwood. "Shall we go back and give her the third degree?"

MARCUM yawned elaborately. "The only trouble is—you see, one of these fellows who was sure Veronica was Vera, I got him to try to talk to her. He called her by name as she passed the table and she didn't even look at him. He wrote a note, and the waiter came back and said Miss Vine had never heard of him. He tried to telephone her here a couple of times and some tough bozo got on the line and put fear in him."

"Did you try checking back on Veronica Vine?"

"Did I? I found out everything about her—everything unimportant. I know about her cook and her maids and her charge accounts and what she eats before a broadcast. On the other hand, I can't find the certificate of her marriage to Major Wax—not a driver's license or a dog license, even. She's got four dogs."

"All right," Harwood said. "Leave her to me."

"Just one thing more," said Marcum as they approached the golden kiosk. "It's none of my business of course, but if you're cracking down on Veronica Vine with anything you'd better crack easy. They say Major Wax can be a nasty customer."

"It just happens," Harwood explained, "that if Veronica Vine is the former Doris Minnick she will come into quite a sum of money. I'm—oh, settling an estate you might say. No criminal action whatever involved."

"Thass goog," Marcum yawned. "I was going to call the office and have one of the boys drive over, but I can't see where we'll need a gun if we're *giving* people money."

They reached the Birdcage.

Artie Danvers' Gleecats boxed their ears with brassy billingsgate as they paused at the checkroom. Twelve fair damosels, capriciously clad, convulsed themselves beneath the floodlights. "The show's not as hot as some in town," Marcum said. "The Major's kind of conservative."

They were led to a wallside table, pleasantly remote, where the tones of ordinary converse could be heard despite the clarinets and trumpets. Thomas Harwood chose steak, Marcum a highball. They still waited to be served when the investigator's toe touched Harwood's ankle.

"The staircase at the right," he said.

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"That's Major Wax, her husband."

Harwood saw a man of medium height who held himself erectly, walked with parade-ground stride. He stood at the foot of the staircase a moment, square-shouldered and lean of waist in his tails, and the moving edge of a baby spot trailed light across him. Smooth dark hair, a youthful face expressionless—then the brightness vanished.

"Didn't you call him by another name before?" Harwood asked.

"His name's Perrin — Alexander Perrin."

Harwood's lips framed a pearshaped silence: "You mean—oh, no, the fellow involved in that alcohol scandal would be at least fifty."

"That's why they call him Major Wax," said Marcum. "They say his face has been lifted so many times he'd split a lip if he smiled. Of course they don't say that where the Major can hear 'em. Yes, he's the same cute customer you were thinking about. In the old tough days he used to throw plenty of weight around. Maybe he still does. That store of his on the third floor runs practically wide open."

"Store?"

Marcum looked, if possible, even more weary and said:

"Dice and cards and a couple of wheels."

Cymbals clashed and trumpets sounded hail. Silence spread as the lights dimmed, and out of the twilight hush a voice came singing. The song was "Sleep, Baby, Sleep," and Harwood recognized the theme arrangement that had soothed his radio many a late evening.

As applause drowned out the melody a spotlight put its cone of brilliance upon Veronica Vine and walked with her to the small piano in the center of the dance-space.

CHAPTER IX

THE LOVE OF WAX-FACE

HER gown was simple white, a strapless mould for her body's lithe perfection, and gardenias her corsage. A kerchief trailed crimson from her hand and ruby brilliants winked in the jeweled band of her dark hair as she smiled and bowed.

She gave them three songs, no more, kissing her hand as she fled from the final plaudits.

"There's something in her voice," Harwood said, "that—well, it's hard to describe how it makes you feel. If a small boy should stroll in with papers to peddle right now he would probably reap a small fortune."

"We listen to her program all the time," Marcum confessed. "My wife gets sentimental and remembers every meal we ordered those three days at Niagara Falls."

Harwood wrote on a card and garnished the message with a greenback. He signaled. "Take one of these to Miss Vine's dressing room and tuck the other in your pocket."

The waiter said, "I'm sorry, sir, we're not allowed—" He hesitated. "You can only get in touch with Miss Vine through the office."

"What office?"

"The Major—Mr. Perrin."

"All right, where do I find him?"

"He's usually busy around this time. Maybe you can ask outside."

Harwood laughed. "Aw, go ahead. I know you can use the money. Just slip that card under Miss Vine's door; that's all you've got to do."

The waiter shrugged. When he had finished a slight re-arrangement of the table the banknote and message had disappeared. They saw him speak briefly to the headwaiter and go out at the

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rear. He returned in a matter of minutes.

"I ran into Miss Vine herself. She says she's sorry but she can't see nobody tonight. If it's business, like you say, you had better write a letter in care of the club here."

Harwood regarded the man thoughtfully. "Now that we're acquainted," he said, "let's get down to brass tacks. You can keep the five and I'll write another note if you've tossed the first one in the garbage. I'm a busy man, my time's worth money, I want to see Miss Vine. Would twenty rouse your interest?"

The waiter thumbed his under lip.

"I'll make it twenty-five. Shall I write—"

"Never mind, mister. I still got the first one."

"I'd like to work on a liberal expense account like yours some time," Marcum said. "What'll you bet you don't draw another blank?"

"I'll talk to her, and tonight," Harwood said. "I'll bet on that. All this runaround is a challenge to my black Scotch stubbornness."

"Since you mention it," Marcum said, "I will have another. Here, waiter—"

But the waiter was already wending among the tables. He went to the small bar and reappeared with stemmed glasses and a bottle upon a tray. The Gleecats launched into the Zigzag Stomp as he mounted the staircase behind them.

The glasses tinkled the bottle as the waiter hesitated in the second-floor hall. He wet his lips and moved on tiptoe. Now he halted abruptly. The voices from the office of Major Wax were muffled and indistinct but recognizable. The woman spoke swiftly, sharply.

"Oh—oh," the waiter whispered, turning. "They're at it again." He descended to the kitchen by way of the fire stairs.

IN THE office Major Wax thrust hands deep in his pockets and rocked heel-and-toe. He said, "You needn't shout. I realize you are tired, my dear. Since I've arranged this little affair in your honor, however—"

"My honor!" she mocked.

"Some of those who will be here are rather important," he went on. He named them. "I thought you'd particularly like to see your old radio friends again."

She dropped her cigarette and crushed it into the rug. (That would annoy him, and tonight she didn't care.) She sat in the leather armchair.

"Why do you keep on pretending?" she said. "My radio friends — you know what they really think of me. What pleasure do you find in bullying and blackmailing these people into attending your dinners when you know they despise the ground you walk on?"

He came around the desk and bent to pick up the crumpled cigarette. He balanced it in his palm an instant, then clenched a fist around it. He said, "Even you can't deny, my dear, that the connections I've managed to make have been most helpful to your career. Where do you think you'd be now without them?"

"I wonder," said Veronica. "I wonder what would have happened."

A buzzing sounded. Major Wax touched a control beside the amplifier box on his desk. "I can't be disturbed now," he called. "I'll communicate when I'm ready."

"Oh, what's the use, what's the use?"

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said Veronica Vine. "What does it matter? I'm tired, I'm licked, that's all. Can't we get out of town, Alex? Can't we go away to the country—anywhere, I don't care. Can't we stop this—"

She looked up at him.

"You know what I want, Alex. I want to get out of the showcase. I want to let down my hair and be human again. Is that a lot to ask?"

He lifted a shoulder slowly. "We might take a trip next month, perhaps."

"Forget your trips. I don't mean that."

"Right at the present time—no, it's unfortunate, my dear. You know the money I have tied up in this place and the one at the lake. You're off your feed, that's all. Think of the women—"

"Don't say it!" she cried. "Don't give me that old song-and-dance again, Alex! My beautiful home and my servants and cars. My charge accounts at all the shops, everything my little heart desires. . . .

"Yes. But look in my purse there. You'll find a few dollars in small bills and change. I don't need cash, you say. Where's the money I've earned? Where does Veronica Vine have her own little bank accounts salted away?"

A CORNER of his mouth quirked. People said his face had been purchased at the plastic surgeon's for so much per inch but Veronica Vine could have scotched this untruth. His features were the product of an iron control almost inhuman. He had even banned emotion from his voice except upon occasions such as now.

"Every cent you've earned," he said, "has been spent in making you what you are. Yes, that much and twice over. You're Veronica Vine and a hundred millions know your face and your name. I've built you up—"

Her harsh laughter stopped him.

"You've built me up for what?" she said. "For your own vanity, to feed your own crazy pride. What have you given me to keep as my own? Could a friend—if you let me have a friend—talk to me casually on the phone? No, Miss Vine cannot be disturbed. If you leave your number, I'll have her call.

"Let a man look at me in a public restaurant or at the theater and one of your hoodlums will come along to put him in his place. Where have I gone in the past five years that you or one of your spies wasn't there to raise the sign 'Private Property of Mr. Alex Perrin, Hands Off, Do Not Touch'?"

"Have you finished?" he asked.

"I thought it was jealousy once," she said. "For a long time I called it that. But before you can be jealous you have to be able to love someone. Love; do you hear? And the only person you've loved in all your life is Alexander Perrin, Esquire, the gambler, the extortioner, the bootlegger, the murder-man."

"Shut up!"

He had come erect and the tense hands spread upon his desk had a tremor in them.

"Sit down," she told him. "You haven't the courage to hit me. You haven't got the guts. You can hide it from the rest but *I* know how yellow you are. I laugh sometimes to see you with a radio sponsor, a show producer: you and your big bold deadly reputation chiseling that extra dollar for the little lady, your talented wife. If they only knew what an empty bluff you are!"

He was coming towards her.

"Sit down," she said. "Sit down, Major Wax"—And suddenly she cried out in a frozen voice, "No—for God's sake, Alex, no!"

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She cowered in the chair and stared at him. After a moment he let his hands fall to his sides and straightened his shoulders again. He said, "Of course I wouldn't touch you, my dear," and backed away to his desk.

The buzzer.

"I told you not to disturb . . . Oh, yes, very well. . . . Tell His Honor I'll be there in a few minutes. And send Haggerty up."

He said, "You go on again in less than an hour, my dear. I would take a little rest if I were you. Our guests will want to see you fresh and gay and happy."

She did not speak nor look at him, and she closed the door softly.

He was fondling the ivory elephants on his chain and smoking a calm cigar when Haggerty came. He said, "I want you to keep an eye on V. V. when she finishes her number tonight. Nothing special. Just to be sure she comes straight upstairs to the supper room. Single-o was telling me some cock-eyed story—anyway, it's best to play safe. How's it going upstairs?"

"Slow, boss. The craps are getting the only decent play."

"Okay, okay. Fix that shirt bosom and straighten your tie. Why do you fellows all wear your tuxedoes as if they were borrowed strait-jackets?"

THE banknotes that the waiter placed upon the table had been thoughtfully folded. "I'm sorry, mister," he repeated, "I just couldn't find Miss Vine at all. Maybe she's gone home."

"It took you a long time to find that out," Harwood said.

The waiter lifted an eyebrow. "As a matter of fact I almost decided to go home myself; but Honest Hoiman, that's me. So there's your dough and I'm sorry, mister."

"Will you send the headwaiter over, please?"

"Why not?"

The headwaiter was gray and grave. He noted the amount of the bills Harwood was unfolding and continued to shake his head. "You can usually find Mr. Perrin on the third floor at any time of evening," he said, "but he definitely stated he would not be available tonight."

"There's a considerable amount of money concerned in this," Harwood argued. "It would be to Perrin's advantage—"

"I'm sorry, sir. Perhaps you'd like to leave your name and address. Or call here tomorrow. Mr. Perrin usually drops in around one, I understand."

"Didn't I tell you?" Marcum said. He yawned. "Personally I could stand a little shuteye."

Thomas Harwood made a brief pungent comment. "Wait here," he said, and went out to the bar. Delay for another twelve hours was completely unimportant of course, but an encounter with red tape of any sort could usually evoke a jutting of the Harwood jaw. He chose the smaller bar.

"I'm five minutes late for an appointment with Mr. Perrin," he said. "Can you tell me where I'll find his office?"

"It's up on the—" Single-o hesitated. "Ask the headwaiter, he'll show you."

"But I'm in a hurry, man. This is important. What floor did you say?"

A man with a thin mustache said, "Who's lookin' for my frien' the Major? You goin' to the big party, pardner? Big party tonight. Elevensh—eleventh anniversary. You one of the Hollywood crowd?"

"Pipe down, Lang," said Single-o. "He's a little high, mister. I never met a newspaper guy yet that had what I'd

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really call a stomach for it. Right inside there, mister—the headwaiter."

Harwood went back toward his table. He stood for a moment at the entrance to glance around the crowded, noisy room and happened to brush shoulders with a tallish young fellow in tails.

"Sorry."

"I beg your—say, just a minute." Harwood had recognized this blond lad as the accompanist who had shared the last bow with Veronica Vine. "Could I talk with you a minute?" he asked.

"Sure." He had a pleasant easy smile.

"My name's Harwood, New York. Here's my card."

"I'm Roy Chandler, Mr. Harwood."

There was an alcove that held telephone booths and cigarette vending machines. "Would you mind stepping over here out of the push?" Harwood asked.

Chandler followed obligingly.

"I have a rather unusual request," Harwood began. He took an envelope from his inside pocket. "Here, take a look at these."

ROY CHANDLER looked at the blue oblongs he held. There were five of them. Each was a check for one thousand dollars payable to the order of Doris Minnick.

The blond lad moved back a step. "That — that's very nice, Mr. Harwood."

"I'm not drunk," said the lawyer, "and those checks are as good as Rockefeller's. Here's the point: for three hours I've been trying to see Veronica Vine. I have news of a considerable inheritance. Now I want you—"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Harwood. It would be worth my job if I—"

"Look," said Harwood. "I take this envelope. I put these checks inside. I drop in my card. All I want you to do is take the envelope to Miss Vine and say I'd like to see her."

"Yes, but those checks are made out to—"

"If the checks mean nothing to her she can tear them up," Harwood said. "Just send them back in pieces and I'll go quietly away. As you see for yourself there's five thousand dollars for Miss Vine to gain and nothing to lose."

"Yes, but the Major—"

"Will you take the envelope or won't you?"

Chandler smiled nervously. "As you say, there's nothing to lose. Sure, I'll give it to her. I'll go on up right now."

"And I'll be right here waiting," Harwood said.

He was pleased with the accomplishment. He had a small-boy instinct to call Marcum out and enjoy a mild gloat, but he contented himself with a cigarette and an aimless scanning through the Chicago telephone directory. There were three Thomas Harwoods listed—one a purveyor of btr & eggs—but not a single Susan Galway.

A hand touched his shoulder. Roy Chandler spoke with eagerness repressed. "Listen, Mr. Harwood, you go on outside and come around back to the kitchen. I'll meet you there."

"But why"— Harwood shrugged. "Have it your own way," he said.

He followed directions. The pianist led him up a narrow stairway and down a dimly lighted hall. They passed a door marked *General Manager* and another that bore a golden star above the lettering *Veronica Vine.*

"She's in the prop room," Chandler whispered. "It's — you won't be disturbed in there."

The room was square and dingy and disheveled, lighted by a single meager

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bulb. Veronica Vine stood near a dust-topped table with Harwood's envelope in her hand.

"Put on the latch, Roy," she said. "I want you to stay."

"But—but we're on in thirty minutes."

"That's all right." She turned to Harwood and studied him with frank, hard eyes. She was not as young as her voice, he saw. Without the spotlight's glamour her face lost beauty and gained intelligence.

Harwood bowed. "Miss Vine—"

"These checks—what is this; what do you want?"

"I'm looking for a certain Doris Minnick in connection with an inheritance of considerable amount. Do you know her?"

"I might."

"What was her mother's name? Where was Doris Minnick born?"

"Catherine Althea Haines. Near Fort Logan, Colorado, 1908."

"Had she brothers or sisters?"

"Her brother died when she was five. His name was Curley—that is, Claude."

She spoke quickly, softly, her eyes intent upon the questioner. She could verify, she said. There were papers and persons who would attest. In something less than ten minutes Thomas Harwood was beginning his formal statement:

"As trust officer for the liquidation of . . ."

CHAPTER X

CANCELLED CHECKS

VERONICA VINE was breathing shallowly and the rouge of her lips had been rubbed askew. She said, "Wait. This money—I can be sure of it for two years, for a year?"

Harwood hesitated. "I can't make an absolute declaration, naturally. Considering the present equities and assets, however, I would say you have a reasonable expectation of at least five—"

"Five years," she whispered. "No. Wait—let me think. . . . The taxis—no, they're all his spies. You, Roy—have you any money, boy, can you drive a car?"

"Well yes, I've got my salary. Sure, Miss Vine."

"There's a U-drive over the block. You rent a car, Roy. Have it parked by the mouth of the alley out in back. They'll pay no attention to that."

"But the show. We've got to go on—"

"There's time," she said. "Rent a car. Go on." She had crossed swiftly and was gripping his arm with both hands. "A car. Hurry. It's music, study, everything you want, don't you understand?"

"But in twenty minutes—"

"Go on," she said. "I'll sing for them. I'll sing their hearts out and maybe my own."

He backed away, bewildered but obedient, and Veronica Vine almost pushed him into the hall. She closed the door and put her back against it. She shook her head and a dark strand fell aslant her brow. With the back of her hand she wiped her open mouth.

"I'm all right," she said. "Just let me catch my breath."

"Perhaps I'd better be going," Harwood said. His shoulders hunched and he rubbed his palms together, strangely tuned to the woman's excitement.

"Naturally, Miss — Miss Minnick, I should say—there are certain formalities to be arranged. If you'll call my hotel in the morning—"

Her head turned slowly from side to

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side and her eyes seemed to see something far beyond. "No no," she breathed. "New York—I'll find you there. We've got to go before he suspects, before he can worm it out. Can you give me money, Mr. Harwood: a hundred dollars, fifty? An hour's start will get us away. I can bleach my hair back, you see, and no one along the road will know."

"But I don't understand," Harwood said. "Are you frightened of something? I'm a lawyer you know, and I'm sure—"

"An hour is all I ask," she whispered. "He'll never stop us if we get a hundred miles away. There's Paris I want to see, and Italy. The greatest music's there, they say. I'm not too old to learn. I'm only—"

She was thrust forward by the door's violent opening. A man stumbled inward, gripping the knob, and Major Wax was close behind.

He said, "Shut the door, Haggerty," and the pupils of his eyes were pinpoints that swiveled from Veronica Vine to Harwood with the birdlike jerks of his head.

"Most unusual, my dear," he said. "Who is this gentleman?"

THERE was a dusty smudge on the woman's cheek and her mouth was held agape. She had thrust her hands behind her and the muscles flexed in her upper arms.

"He—I used to know him long ago." Her voice was thin.

"My name is Harwood," the lawyer said. "I've been trying all evening to get in touch with you, Mr. Perrin, about a matter—"

"He's just an old friend," said Veronica quickly. "He's got to leave. I've got to get ready for the show."

"Let me see it, my dear." Major Wax extended his hand. "Let me have whatever's behind your back."

"It's only"— she began, and then her lips drew tight. "I've nothing to hide," she said sharply. "This man is an attorney, and what he brought me is money: money that's mine. It's here, right here." She held up the sheaf of checks.

"Ah," said Major Wax. "Then perhaps my office is the place to discuss the matter. Or better still, Mr. Harwood, since my wife and I are extremely busy now, you could call on us tomorrow."

"No!" the woman cried. "I'm going with him now, Alex, and alone. You can't stop me, you hear?"

"I thought I heard some mention of going away and an hour's start as I chanced to pass outside," said Major Wax. "Was I mistaken about that, my dear?"

She met his eyes and for three breaths there was silence. She nodded then.

"All right," she said, "I'm going away. I'm going to live again and be happy if I can. You'll have to get another billboard, Alex, to advertise what a great successful man you are."

The pinpoint eyes flicked at Harwood. "You're tired and nervous, my dear. You'll feel better in the morning."

She laughed at him. "I'll feel better in the morning than I've ever felt before. I'll feel free again, young again. I'll go where I please and talk to whomever I want. I'll dance and get drunk and sit in men's laps while I sing."

"Wait!" The word was sharp-edged and muscles worked along his rigid jaw. "You can't," he said harshly. "We've made a good team and you can't break it up. We'll take a trip, Veronica, anywhere you say."

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But she shook her head, her laughter dry with scorn. "It's too late, Alex. We're all washed up, we're through. You can tell your newspaper pets anything you want and find some pretty explanations for all your bigshot friends. I don't care what you say and I'll not deny it. It's only your vanity that will be hurt, and that heals quick. You can find some other—"

Haggerty had moved away from the door and the blond young pianist, Roy Chandler, pushed it open now. "I've got the car, Veronica," he said, breathless. "It's parked there where you said. And I borrowed some cash—"

He saw the face of Major Wax.

The transformation of the face was not the dropping of a mask to disclose an under ugliness. It was rather the melting of a fleshy plastic beneath the beam of an inexorable heat.

There was a shriveling that turned to wrinkles and a fluid flabbiness that became jowls. There was a puckering and distortion as Major Wax jerked back a step and one arm was upflung as if he were warding a blow. The big hand of Haggerty reached out to steady him.

"Alex!" the woman cried. "Run, Roy—"

And she screamed, "No, Alex, I swear. He's just a kid. There's never been another man."

Major Wax had leaned for an instant against Haggerty, his hand against the big man's shirtfront, and the crawling fingers had not far to reach before they could pull the automatic from Haggerty's shoulder holster.

His twisted mouth had been moving all the time and now it said, "The pretty boy; the pretty yellow rat."

Veronica Vine screamed again.

SHE was running toward the pianist —to embrace him, to shield him, to thrust him out the door; who knows? —and this was her position and the line of fire was so.

The automatic was wavering and the flat explosions were husky coughs from a deep metallic mouth.

The first bullet slapped her bare shoulder high and turned her with its impact. The second struck a club against her head and bludgeoned her down.

A toy soldier came from a Christmas tree long ago and his inner mechanism snapped when careless fingers wound the spring too tight. The whirring soldier slanted and sagged and walked with jerking goosestep knees to thump its head in frenzy against the playroom wall. It was as a wounded tin soldier that Thomas Harwood would remember Major Wax.

He held his arm out stiffly and the wild blind shots were mechanically spaced. He fired twice at the blank doorway where the blond piano boy had been. He stared down at the silken legs—did he see them, did he know them? — as his long strides lurched ahead.

He clutched the door frame, swaying, and squeezed the trigger again and once again with the muzzle of the automatic pointed into the hall.

Then his arm fell to his side and he turned his old man's slack-jawed face to Haggerty and Harwood.

His voice was light, as if it were coming from far away.

"It was the yellow rat I wanted," he said. "I never meant—"

He saw Veronica Vine. He blinked at her body and licked his lips. His eyes moved slowly to the dangling automatic and he lifted it.

"The full load, Haggerty?" he

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asked. "Have I got the seventh left?"

The big gunman glanced at Harwood, sweat on his heavy face.

"She would never believe I loved her," said Major Wax, "but for me she was all the women in the world. She—I—our luck ran out, I guess."

He looked down at her again, and then with a queer, mechanical movement he brought his body and his face under tight control. He lifted his head and breathed deeply once.

The voices had rushed up the hall and the faces were hovering, peering in. Major Wax walked slowly toward them and they faded back. "Close the door, Haggerty," he said. "Let the police come. They will find me in my office."

He walked down the hall through silence but before he had closed the office door the prowl car sirens had begun to wail outside. From the kitchen and the dance floor the curious came to crowd and question. Within brief minutes the bluecoats of the law were pushing through.

"In there," big Haggerty told them.

A burly officer, revolver in hand, pounded the panel. He turned the knob and thrust. Major Wax sat at his desk with the murder gun on the blotter before him. He pushed it aside and stood. His face was rigidly expressionless though his lips seemed on the verge of a smile.

"She was right, officer," he said. "I'm too old. I haven't got the guts. Will you give me three minutes to call my lawyers?"

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Meeting Without Moonlight

By DAVID V. REED

Author of "The Golden Boneyard," "Secret of the Silent Drum," etc.

BUCK was leaning far back in the sheriff's swivel-chair and there was a faint smile on his thin face. "Sure," he said, "I always told Gun Sam he had a hand faster than a rattlesnake. Fastest man on the draw in the state. But like I say, Sheriff, I always used to say to him that I was just a little faster up here." He tapped his forehead, and the smile, warm with reminiscence, lingered.

"Get your feet off my desk," said the sheriff. "Buck, understand me now. Murder is a serious charge in this county." The sheriff's eyes moved glumly to the horn-handled revolver that lay in its holster on the desk. The sheriff looked slowly at the half dozen men who were standing about idly in his office; one of them was swinging the little door on the partition that bisected the room.

The sheriff closed his eyes momentarily, and when he spoke again, there was a confused note of fondness and anger in his voice. "Buck, I thought I'd settled your feuding with Sam when you both promised not to draw against each other; not again."

"Fast, wasn't he?" said Buck, crossing his legs. "I'll say that for him. I didn't mind promising at all. Came off second best both times I drew against him, and lucky to be alive. But like I say—"

"There are a lot of things I knew about you," the sheriff interrupted, "but I was always ready to take your word. Sam's too, for that matter. I guess I'm cured. Murder has got to be a serious charge in this county."

Buck looked at the sheriff, and his smile faded a bit. He was a tall, bony man, and sitting the way he was, he looked like a half-folded jack-knife. His forehead wrinkled, and he smoothed it out with a long, bony hand. The sheriff was biting the end of his mustache.

Buck said: "That's no way to speak of the dead. Nor of me. Gun Sam and I promised you we'd never draw against each other and we meant it. Gun Sam never broke his word in his life. Neither did I."

And having delivered himself of the censure, Buck relaxed and the half-smile came back, and his gray-flecked eyes smiled too. "Just a little faster up here," he said. He had said it for the tenth time since he had sat down

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in the sheriff's swivel-chair. "But like you say," he suddenly added, "murder is a serious thing. I realize that. So instead of waiting until they bring him in, if it'll ease your mind, why I'll tell you the way it was."

THIS was last night (Buck began) only it wasn't night when I started. I was coming down from Anderson's place, intending to cross over and go on to Haley's and maybe the Bar Double T. Then, before I knew it, it was getting dark and I realized I'd been wasting time. Not wanting to spend the night in the open, I decided to head for Green Canyon and go over the path through the mountain, saving a couple of hours. I'd done it before in the dark and I wasn't afraid of having to do it again.

Well, I forded the creek by sundown, and by dark I was just about starting on the way up over the canyon. Like I always say, my saddler is about half mountain goat, so there we were, moving up that narrow trail like it was a highway, side-stepping the loose shale and never touching a ticklish spot. Aren't many horses, nor men, for that matter, can take the Green Canyon trail on a moonless night.

We'd gotten about up to the top when I heard the other horse. First I thought it was somebody behind me; then I laughed. I knew there wasn't anyone could follow me up so fast they'd keep sounding louder, the way this one was. So I knew there was somebody coming up the other side, and from where I was and judging by the sound, I figured we'd meet right at the top and maybe a little over, not far from the place where the trail widens out for about fifteen feet.

Well, it was just like I'd figured. I got to the top and waited. There was this other horse coming up, and though I couldn't see it, I knew it had stopped about ten feet from me. "Mister," I called out, "this is Buck Coombs from the Rancho Gomez. Back down a couple of feet and let me pass." You see, the wide stretch was a little past where he'd come, and I'd waited to make sure there'd be no accident.

For about half a minute there was no answer. Then I heard a match scratch, and I saw the orange light cupped, and over it, lighting a cigarette, I saw Gun Sam's face. He paid no particular attention to me, keeping his eyes on the match, and the lines on his face were hard. Then he said, "I'll be damned if I back down for you or anybody else."

"Sam," I said, "there's no room where I am. You just passed the only place that'll hold two horses."

"I know it," said Sam, and he snuffed the match out.

So we sat there a minute, neither of us moving, and the only thing I could see was the tip of that cigarette burning in the dark. I was wondering what Sam had on his mind, acting so contrary. "We'll be here all night," I said, "unless you move down a piece."

He took his time about answering. "I'll wait until I've finished this smoke. Then I'm coming through," he said.

That was pretty straight talking, Sheriff, but remembering what we'd told you, I said, "Sam, you know we promised Tom Bayliss not to draw against each other." And the minute I said it, I could have bitten my tongue off. It wasn't the sort of thing a man says. I knew Gun Sam remembered, the same as I did, and I knew he'd no sooner think of breaking his word than I would.

But Gun Sam, instead of understanding that I was sorry I'd said what

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I did; instead of that he took no notice and said in that cold way of his, "I'm not forgetting my word. I won't draw against you."

So I just had to wait.

Well, he'd smoked that cigarette about halfway down by then, and I knew that Sam never smoked them down much further. I wondered for a second what he was aiming to do, but I couldn't see an inch into the darkness. And then the next minute, I saw his cigarette go flying off and down into the canyon. And there were both our guns blazing and it was all over.

THE sheriff sat quite still when Buck came to this point. Then, angrily, he shouted, "What the hell do you mean, both your guns?"

But the look on Buck's face quieted him down. It was a pitying look, the kind that gets under a man's skin. The sheriff said, "I thought you said . . ." and he faltered for the moment, hopelessly lost.

"Sheriff," said Buck, "you still think a man's word don't mean anything to him. Sheriff, a man's word is the only thing he's got. I knew Gun Sam meant what he said. I knew he wouldn't draw against me, same as I wouldn't against him. He was intending to shoot my horse out from under me."

The hint of a smile had gone now. "It's like I always said, he was a little faster on the draw, but I was a little faster up here. I just quietly got off my horse, and when the shooting was over, Sam and both our horses had gone over into the canyon."

Buck uncrossed his legs and looked away from the sheriff. "I never killed a horse before in my life," he said.

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The Devil's Doubloons

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

EL DIABLO was the signature on the mysterious note which brought five pieces of gold to DON CARLOS DE LA MENDOZA, last of a noble Spanish family, as this young advocate was about to kill himself in desperation.

Shortly afterward, in the *cantina* of PEDRO PULIDO in Monterey, Don Carlos played one of the pieces of gold and won a small fortune; saw the dancing of CARMENCITA, a masked beauty; and made two enemies: CAPITAN ZUBIATE, *commandante* of the Monterey *presidio,* and MARCOS LOPEZ, an unscrupulous trader of low birth.

Perplexed by another note from El Diablo, in which he is urged to use his new wealth on the side of right and justice, Mendoza consults with his confessor, good FRAY LUIS. The *fray* advises him to set himself up as an advocate of competence, and to take as his first client DON ANTONIO DE LA PRADO, who has been cheated of his land by Marcos Lopez.

On Mendoza's request, the *fray* consents to take charge of half of the advocate's newly gained wealth, which the mysterious El Diablo has stipulated is to be reserved for him.

HAVING bought himself a home and acquired a loyal servant, BERNARDO, Mendoza visits Don Antonio and discovers that his lovely daughter, INEZ DE LA PRADO, is the same *señorita* who danced at Pulido's *cantina* under the name of Carmencita.

He takes Don Antonio's case, brings Marcos Lopez before JUAN CAZZARA, the magistrate, and presents a convincing legal case against Lopez for damages due Don

This story began in the Argosy for March 16

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Antonio. But the magistrate postpones his decision until the morrow.

Meanwhile Don Carlos is visited by young DON JOSÉ SENTOUS, admirer of Carmencita, who had rushed to Mendoza's defense in a tavern brawl with Lopez. Don José has important information:

JUANITA, a *cantina* girl who loves José hopelessly, has warned him that both he and Don Carlos have been singled out for death and disgrace, in revenge for their affronts to the wealthy trader.

Later the same evening Don Carlos is lured from his home and attacked. His servant Bernardo is put out of the fight at once; and before Don Carlos can reach his sword, his head seems to explode beneath a smashing blow. . . .

CHAPTER XII

JUMP, SAILOR!

DON CARLOS' next realization of consciousness was that he was a victim of nausea. He groaned and opened his eyes to darkness. His groping hands came in contact with wood. He struggled to sit erect.

His body seemed to be rolling from side to side, and Don Carlos lifted his hands to his head as if in an effort to hold it still. He found his hair matted and damp, and he knew from the feel that the dampness was blood. Then he remembered: he had received a terrific blow on his head.

The entire thing came back to him now. He had been attacked beside his own patio wall. He recalled seeing Bernardo struck to earth. He had been carried away alive from the spot, evidently, instead of being slain.

His nausea passed, and his senses became clearer. An offensive odor struck into his nostrils. The swaying motion continued. He heard a distant creaking sound. As he managed to get to his feet, his head cracked against a ceiling, and he realized that he was in some place where he could not stand erect.

At the same instant, another realization came to him. He was on a ship.

Don Carlos took a few cautious steps forward, feeling his way along a slimy wall. His foot struck against something soft and yielding, and he heard a groan. He was not alone in this place of darkness.

He heard distant voices, and crouched against the wall, waiting. He already had ascertained that his sword had been taken from him, and that his clothing had been half torn off his body.

His pockets were turned inside out, so no doubt he had been robbed. His fingers felt in the tiny hidden pocket at the bottom of his jacket, and he gasped. His other valuables had been taken from him, but the searchers had missed this tiny pocket which held the five doubloons.

HE REALIZED that a door was being opened cautiously, and a shaft of light struck through the inky darkness. The light revealed to Don Carlos that his guess had been correct. He was in the foul forecastle of a ship. The craft was pitching like a bucking horse, and stank like a slaver.

Somebody at the door held the torch high, and yellowish light flooded the forecastle. Two brutish fellows were revealed in the light.

"So you're alive and on your feet, my fine bird?" one asked. "And how about the other?"

The man who held the torch stepped forward with the other at his side. Then Don Carlos saw that the man against whom he had stumbled was Don José Sentous, and that consciousness was just returning to him.

"Don José!" he shouted, and lurched

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away from the wall to kneel beside him.

"Is it you, Don Carlos?"

"In the same plight as yourself."

"Where are we, *amigo?*"

"On a ship, I think."

The man who held the torch laughed. "On a ship," he confirmed. "On the good ship *Westward,* bound for the Sandwich Islands, after we call at San Diego de Alcala to pick up a couple of *frailes* who wish to do missionary work among the bronze savages."

"We have left the harbor of Monterey?" Don Carlos asked, as he helped Don José to his feet and held him up.

"We are just at the point of leaving, *señor,*" the man with the torch replied. "On deck with you, my fine gentlemen, for the master would have a look at you."

"We must be put ashore immediately," Don Carlos said. "A mistake has been made."

"The mistake is the master's in shipping two such as you, instead of a couple of capable hands. We are shorthanded as it is, and the voyage a perilous one. But what you don't know about seamanship may be taught with a rope's end."

"I am Don Carlos de la Mendoza, and this man is Don Josè Sentous, and—"

"You are but common hands, as far as I am concerned, *señor.* On deck with you, and be quick about it! Our master is not one to be kept waiting."

Don Carlos did not try to argue. He led Don Josè slowly to the door, and they stooped and passed through and ascended to the deck.

A storm had rushed in from the sea to blot out the light of moon and stars. Don Carlos guessed that it was almost dawn, and that he and Don Josè had been unconscious in the forecastle for some time. There was a bitter taste in his mouth, and he doubted not that drugged wine had been poured down his throat, and Don Josè treated in a similar manner.

THE ship was rolling and pitching as the crew prepared her for sailing. A huge bearded man was bellowing orders. A second was repeating them. Sailors were scurrying around the craft, and some were starting up into the rigging.

"Stand here at the rail until the master is ready for you," the man with the torch ordered.

The one with him hurried across the rolling deck to report to the master.

"What happened to you, *amigo?*" Don Carlos asked Don Josè.

"I heard that Carmencita was to dance, and started for the *cantina.* I was attacked on the way."

"I fell into the same trap," Don Carlos confessed. "It is evident that Marcos Lopez has engineered our abduction."

"Why did he not merely have us slain?"

"Our bodies would have been found, and there would have been an investigation. This way, we simply disappear. And if I do not present myself in court this morning, Don Antonio's cause is lost. The reason for our being here is apparent."

"Can we escape?"

"We can try, if we have the chance. This ship is to go to San Diego de Alcala first, from what we have been told. We might escape her there, though I doubt it. I must be in court in Monterey this morning, so it is imperative that we escape here and now. How can you swim?"

"Like a fish," Don Josè replied.

"*Bueno!* It is the same with me."

There was no opportunity for them

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to say more, or make plans, for a raucous voice bellowed, and the man with the torch turned to them and ordered them forward. They went across the rolling deck to where the ship's master awaited them.

He stood with his hairy fists planted against his hips, a foul beast by the sight of him, and squinted one eye as he looked them over.

"Fine young gentlemen, eh? When I need real sailors," he growled.

"There has been some mistake," Don Carlos told him. "I am—"

"You are a member of my crew, and so is your companion, and that is all I want to know," the shipmaster interrupted. "Call yourselves what you please. You'll do a man's work, each of you."

"I demand to be landed immediately with my companion," Don Carlos said. "I'll pay for my release and the trouble of setting us ashore."

"You have gold?"

"I have plenty of gold in my house ashore. You can send two of your men with me."

"Ha! Is it perhaps worth a hundred pieces of gold?" the shipmaster asked.

"It is, *señor*. And if you will disclose the truth about our abduction, it will be worth much more to you. If you will delay sailing for a day and appear in court—"

"I do not like courts, *señor*. They smell of jails. I prefer the open sea."

"I'll make it a hundred pieces of gold for each of us, if you'll put us ashore immediately."

THE shipmaster bent toward him and laughed a little. "The gold tempts me, *señor*," he admitted. "But I may have to return to Monterey some time, and there are those here capable of doing me rare mischief if I land you now. You are supposed to disappear, *señores*."

"So that is the way of it!" Don Carlos said.

"That is the way of it, *señor*. It may be of interest to you to know that I have received more than two hundred pieces of gold to carry you to the Sandwich Islands and drop you there—or drop you overside some dark night in the middle of the ocean. Moreover, I am assured of the friendship of a man in a high place if I do this."

He gestured violently to the man with the torch. "Take them forward and put them to work," he ordered, "and watch them well."

"Get for'ard!" the man with the torch growled at them. "Be quick, or I'll lay a rope across your shoulders!"

"That might result in sudden disaster for you, *señor*," Don Carlos warned.

"Ha! You have no blade swinging at your side now, my pretty fellow. And I could break you in two with my bare hands, or smash your face with a blow. For'ard!"

Don José would have said something then, but Don Carlos gripped his arm in a signal for silence. They stumbled forward side by side, and the man with the torch kept at their heels.

A chantey roared out on the wind. The anchor was coming up. In the rigging, men were making sail. Don Carlos could see a tiny pinpoint of light through the darkness, and that and the sound of breakers told him in which direction was the shore.

"Stand here at the rail, my fine birds of rare plumage, out of the way," the man who had them in charge ordered. "There will be work enough for you when once we've started. I am wondering how your aristocratic, well-fed bellies will take to the food and drink

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you'll get aboard us. We'll make men of you, or slay you trying to do it."

"What would happen to you if we were to escape?" Don Carlos asked.

"A flogging, perhaps. Or possibly the master, in a mood of humor, would merely clip off my ears."

"And if you escaped with us?"

"That would be a different matter. I do not like this ship. I have no love for her master. But I am a seafaring man, and must eat."

"It must be a dog's life," Don Carlos hinted. "Ashore, you could live as you pleased. You could travel to San Francisco de Asis and possibly ship on a vessel bound for Spain, if the sea called to you."

"Ashore, I'd starve. And how could I travel the distance to San Francisco de Asis, save afoot?"

"If you had gold—"

"Ha! If a fish had wings—"

"IF YOU had a piece of gold now, would you go over the rail with us? We are both good swimmers. That light ashore—we could make for that. They'd never see us in the darkness. They are busy with the ship, because of the raging wind—"

"You speak glibly of gold, *señor*. It is foolish talk. Well I know you have no gold on your person now, for I know the men who searched you."

"Here!" Don Carlos said. He had taken one of the doubloons from the hidden pocket, and now he slipped it cautiously into the sailor's hand. In the light from the torch, the man could see it well. His eyes bulged, and he sucked in his breath sharply.

The ship was coming around before the wind. The master bellowed another volley of orders, and the mate repeated them. No attention was being given to those at the rail. The man with the torch turned and bent his head to listen, to learn whether any of the orders concerned him.

Don Carlos nudged Don José, and they vaulted the rail and went overside, down into the tumbling dark water. A raucous bellow rang in their ears as the sailor hurled the torch at them. It struck the water and was extinguished.

As Don Carlos came up, he heard another splash not far away.

"I am with you, *señor*," the sailor said.

"*Bueno!* Make straight for the light ashore. Let us swim near one another. Don José!"

"I am here, *amigo*."

"Save breath, and swim."

They could hear howls and curses from the deck of the ship as she heeled over and moved away, her sails filled with the gusty wind. Don Carlos knew the harbor well. He knew the *Westward* could not put about in time to pick them up.

He swam on. A flash of lightning revealed Don José not far from him. He called, and the sailor answered from a short distance ahead.

"Make for the light!" Don Carlos shouted into the raging wind.

CHAPTER XIII

A LIGHT FROM NOWHERE

FAINT light appeared among the storm clouds, and they knew dawn was coming. They swam on, fighting continually against the choppy sea. Frequently they looked ahead to see the pinpoint of light and keep their bearings. They swam as closely together as wind and waves allowed, calling at intervals.

Good swimmers all, yet they found progress a constant battle. The angry waters seemed determined to suck them

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down. Their clothing hindered them. They kicked off what they could as they swam.

Don Josè called sharply to the others as the dawn broke, and they saw he was in difficulties. Don Carlos was the first to reach his side, but the sailor was there a moment later.

"The cold water . . . a cramp . . ." Don Josè cried into the wind.

"Have courage, *amigo!*" Don Carlos shouted into his ear. "We'll get you through."

They supported him until he could swim on again, then kept on either side of him and within easy reach. The running tide semed determined to keep them from making a landing. Don Carlos felt his own strength ebbing rapidly, and he knew the sailor was having trouble also.

"Swim on!" Don Carlos cried. "We must gain the shore now."

The ship had disappeared into the billowing mists. The land seemed much nearer, a line of white breakers crashing against the rocks. In a little cove, they could see an adobe hut, and a small boat drawn up before it on the beach; they made for that. It was a fisherman's hut, Don Carlos guessed.

Don Josè swam on ahead of the other two, renewed strength seeming to come to him at sight of land so near. Don Carlos and the sailor kept side by side.

"It is . . . too far . . . *señor,*" the sailor gasped.

"Be a man!" Don Carlos shouted at him. "Be a man of the sea!"

The sailor gasped and went under, and when he came up again his face was twisted with pain. Don Carlos swam up beside him, grappled with him as the sailor gripped him in a death struggle. Don Carlos twisted away and struck at the man's face repeatedly, with all his strength, until he had found the chin.

He had a burden to tow now. Don José was too far ahead to hear his cries, and could not come to his aid. Don Carlos began to doubt he could make it. His limbs felt like lead. His heart was hammering at his ribs. His head was buzzing.

A wave rolled him up with his burden, and he saw Don José fighting the boiling water along the shore. He shouted, but Don José evidently did not hear him.

When another wave rolled him high, Don Carlos could see Don José stretched up on the land, motionless, either insensible or too exhausted to move.

The sailor began struggling again, and Don Carlos started to fight him.

"I am . . . all right now . . . *señor,*" the sailor panted. "Let me go."

Thankfully, Don Carlos did so. The waves rolled them in, but they were compelled to fight the violent undertow. Finally white water was around them.

"'Ware the rocks!" the sailor cried.

Even as the other spoke, Don Carlos was tossed against one, and felt a crushing blow in his side. The breath was almost knocked out of his body. The water washed him backward, and he fought against its pull. The sailor clutched at him and missed.

But Don Carlos recovered a measure of strength in his desperation, and fought forward again. He came abreast the sailor. A breaker tossed them, and their feet touched bottom. They grasped each other, fought to keep their footing, and the next breaker washed them up on the sand.

THEY reeled away from the water's edge a distance and fell prone not far from Don José. Don Carlos closed

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his eyes. He was gasping painfully for breath. The pain in his side told him that he could not have traveled another hundred feet through the water. He had come to land just in time.

"*Señor . . . señor,*" the sailor was muttering as he clutched at Don Carlos' shoulder.

"I am—all right," Don Carlos managed to say.

The sailor helped him, and he rolled over and sat up on the sand. A drizzle of rain was falling. Mist swirled in from the sea, and the air was chill. Don Carlos shivered.

"Your friend—" the sailor said.

He helped Don Carlos to his feet, and together they staggered over to Don José. The young man sat up as they came to him. His face was white and drawn.

"I was almost gone," Don José said.

"So were we all," Don Carlos told him. "But we are alive and on shore."

"Here comes a man," the sailor told them. "He is coming from the hut. And there is another."

They looked that way. Their arrival on the beach had been noted. A peon and a native were hurrying toward them across the sand.

"Here, *señor,*" the sailor said, clutching Don Carlos' hand and pressing something into it. "It is the doubloon you gave me."

"Keep it. I meant for you to have it."

"Ah, no, *señor.* You saved my life back there in the sea. And if such as I am caught with a doubloon, they will think I stole it."

"Attend me," Don Carlos said. "I have a strange fancy for that particular coin. I'll take it. But I'll keep you beside me. I am a man of substance—"

"I can tell that, *señor.*"

"I'll take you to my house in the town and have you outfitted with proper clothing, and give you gold to do with as you please. If you know aught of our abduction, and can tell of it—"

"That I do, *señor.* I was one of the men waiting with the small boat when you and your young friend were brought to it. I heard the master talking."

"Do you know the name of the man who paid the shipmaster to abduct us?"

"I heard the name of Marcos Lopez mentioned, *señor.*"

"It is enough," Don Carlos said. "Be silent now."

THE peon and native came up to them and looked at them with suspicion. Don Carlos took a step forward.

"I am Don Carlos de la Mendoza," he explained, "and these two men are my friends. We swam ashore from the *Westward* as it was putting out to sea, for we had been held aboard forcibly, and were able to escape. Take us to your hut, warm us and give us wine and food. Find some makeshift clothing for us. You will be rewarded with gold."

The peon knuckled his forehead, grunted something, and turned to lead the way. He said something to the native, who ran ahead. A fire was roaring in the fireplace when they arrived at the hut, and they stood before it holding their hands to the blaze.

The peon brought out a jug of thin red wine, and they gulped it thankfully. The grunting native served them strips of dried fish and frijoles from a pot which hung over the fireplace.

"You are fishermen?" Don Carlos asked the peon.

"*Si, señor.*"

"You have made the best catch of your life today. Aid us further, and I'll buy you a new boat, and proper

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nets, and see you settled firmly in your business. And you may bring fresh fish to my *casa* each morning."

"We are your slaves, *señor*."

"What have you for clothing?"

Don Carlos had lost his breeches in the sea, and he had managed to get off his boots. His underclothing was torn and ragged. His shirt and jacket had been whipped to shreds. But the doubloons were still in the hidden pocket.

Don José was ragged also. The sailor had not had much clothing to start with, and his condition did not much matter. The peon and native opened a battered chest and tumbled its contents on the packed dirt floor of the hut. Ragged trousers and a couple of torn shirts were in the mess.

"They will serve," Don Carlos said.

He got into a pair of the trousers, and Don José into the other. Their feet were bare, and would have to remain so for the present.

THE native threw more fuel into the fireplace, the flames sprang up, and they continued to warm themselves and get the chill of the sea out of their bodies. Strength returned to them rapidly. Don Carlos went to the door.

"It will rain harder," he said. "I must get to town. The three of us will go together."

"Certain persons will be surprised to see us," Don José suggested.

"Let me handle the affair, *amigo*," Don Carlos said. "I must make my appearance in court at the proper time, for much depends on it. You may appear with me. But first we must get to my *casa*. It is a long walk."

"In bare feet," Don José added. "Mine are all too tender."

Don Carlos faced the owner of the hut again. "You know the location of my house?"

"*Sí, señor*. I was in town a few days ago, and heard how you had bought it."

"Can you come there this evening, about two hours after sunset?"

"*Sí, señor*."

"Come at that time, then, for your reward."

"But I have done little, *señor*."

"You have done much. But for the light burning in your hut, we never would have made the shore."

The peon's eyes bulged. "A light, *señor?* There was no light burning in my hut."

"But I saw it," Don Carlos protested.

"We all saw it," Don José added.

"There must be some mistake, *señores*. There was no light burning. We were asleep, and when we woke up and started out I saw you three on the shore."

Don Carlos had a moment of bewilderment. But for the light he was sure he had seen, they would have been lost. In the darkness and storm, they could not have made directly for the shore. Those doubloons—

"Let us go," he said to the others, suddenly.

Don Carlos led the way across the sand, and they went up among the rocks, the sailor laughing as the others stepped gingerly because of their tender feet.

They cut across a flat where the footing was mud and where saw-grass cut at their bare feet and ankles, and finally came to a winding foot trail which ran toward Monterey.

Don Carlos walked as swiftly as he could, and the others kept pace with him. Don Carlos had his jacket in a roll beneath his arm, and there was nothing about him in the way of clothing to indicate that he was more than a penniless peon. They came to the outskirts

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of the town and hurried along with lowered heads, kicking at the dogs which snarled at their heels.

When they reached the *casa,* Don Carlos used the knocker on the patio gate. The gate was opened, and a servant looked out at them.

"Away, beggars!" he snapped.

"Look again, *señor,*" Don Carlos said, sternly. "This is your master, home from the wars. Open quickly."

CHAPTER XIV

ROOM FOR A ROGUE

DON CARLOS' first act was to order that the sailor be taken to a chamber and furnished hot water for a bath, that he be given food and wine and allowed to rest, and afterward fitted with clothing.

Then he asked after Bernardo, and was surprised to learn that he was in the house. Don Carlos had felt sure he had been slain and his body left in the street to be found by passersby.

Bernardo stood before him, his manner abject.

"I failed you, Don Carlos," he said. "I was asleep at the wrong moment. There is no excuse for me. Have me kicked from the place. I deserve it."

"You shall have another chance," Don Carlos told him.

"I'll not fail you again."

"How do you fare?"

"They tried to crack my head, but it was too tough. When I was myself again, I was alone beside the patio wall, and managed to get to the gate. I am all right now, Don Carlos, except there is a lump behind my ear!"

"Get the carriage ready," Don Carlos instructed. "Go to Don Antonio's place and drive him to the court. Tell him I will be there at the proper moment. Say nothing of the adventure."

Bernardo bobbed his head and hurried away, and Don Carlos went up the broad stairs with Don José, and to his chamber. They bathed and dressed in fresh clothing—Don José sending one of Don Carlos' servants to his own house for garments—and Don Carlos opened a chest and brought out two blades of fine steel.

"These are more for service than for dress," he observed. "We cannot wear them in the court, since that is against the law except for the soldiery; but we can have Bernardo care for them outside, so they will be handy if needed."

"What do you intend in regard to Marcos Lopez?" Don José asked.

"Circumstances will guide my actions, *amigo.* Do you hold your hand and keep your temper, no matter how difficult the task, until I have a plan."

"It will be a difficult task, no doubt, but I'll obey you," Don José replied. "A mere sight of him would make me itch to draw blade and run him through."

Along the way, as they walked to the *magistrado's* court, men greeted Don Carlos respectfully and called him by name, though he did not know many of them. They knew only of his triumph in court the day before, and that he was on his way to seal that victory now, and nothing of what had happened during the night.

Don Carlos' carriage was near the court when they arrived, with Bernardo standing at the head of the horses. He reported that Don Antonio de la Prado had gone inside.

Don Carlos and Don José left their swords in the carriage.

JUAN CAZZARA had ascended the bench and was prepared to continue the hearing. Capitán Zubiate had

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appeared with Marcos Lopez, who grinned at his friends as he glanced around the room.

Old Don Antonio sat alone at the end of the long table with his elderly servant, feeling anxiety because Don Carlos had not arrived. He had been assured by Bernardo that Don Carlos would be there.

"The court is prepared to give judgment in this cause," Cazzara announced. "The advocate for Don Antonio de la Prado will present the bill of judgment which I instructed him to prepare."

There was a stir in the room, and necks craned. Cazzara tapped impatiently with his gavel.

"Come, come!" he cried. "The time of the court is valuable. Let the advocate advance."

"Allow me to instruct the court that the advocate is not here," Marcos Lopez' counselor said. "He has seen fit to ignore the court's order to be present with the bill of judgment. No doubt he has ascertained that his contentions made yesterday were not borne out by King's law—"

"Good morning, *señores,*" called a voice at the door.

All in the room turned to see Don Carlos striding forward, with Don José Sentous at his heels. Marcos Lopez' counselor almost choked. Marcos Lopez seemed on the verge of a stroke. Don Antonio gave an exclamation of joy. And the *magistrado* seemed surprised at Don Carlos' entrance.

"You are late, *señor,*" Cazzara rebuked.

"Only a moment," Don Carlos pointed out. "Circumstances which I shall explain presently will convince the court that my delay was the fault of others. I have here with me the bill of judgment, prepared as the court ordered, and ready for the official signature. It calls for the restitution of the property of Don Antonio, the cancellation of the original debt, and damages in the sum of three thousand pieces of gold."

Lopez' advocate sprang to his feet.

"I ask the court for further delay," he shouted. "No doubt the court has not had time to inspect the laws—"

"I am quite sure," Don Carlos interrupted, his voice ringing as he looked straight at Cazzara, "that this court is intelligent enough not to need a long time to interpret the laws which apply to this particular case. The *magistrado* knows the law and holds sacred the dignity of this court, and his official conduct no doubt will meet with the approval of the Viceroy—when report of this cause is made to him."

Cazzara blinked at the significance of that remark.

"The court will sign the bill of judgment," he announced. "The three thousand pieces of gold are now in the court's custody and will be turned over to Don Antonio de la Prado immediately. Restitution of his land is hereby ordered, and the old debt canceled. The evidence is ample and the law is plain."

MARCOS LOPEZ' face was a thundercloud, and no doubt he would have voiced an outburst had not his counselor gripped his arm to prevent him. He arose and turned angrily toward the door, but the further words of Don Carlos stopped him.

"I ask this honorable court to issue immediately a warrant of detention for Señor Marcos Lopez," Don Carlos was saying. "The charge is violent abduction and conspiracy to obstruct justice."

"How is this?" Cazzara cried.

"At the instigation of this Marcos Lopez, I and Don José Sentous were

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assaulted and abducted last night, and put aboard the ship *Westward,* which sailed at dawn. It was an attempt to prevent my appearing here this morning in answer to an order by this court. The man Lopez clearly is in contempt."

"You have proof of all this?" Cazzara asked.

"Monstrous! An unwarranted attack on my integrity!" Lopez howled.

"I have ample proof," Don Carlos replied. "When we made our escape from the ship, Don José and I brought with us a member of the crew who aided in the abduction. I will have him in court when necessary. And the master of the vessel made certain statements, to which both I and Don José will testify. Our words should carry some weight."

"Such a grave charge—" Cazzara began, fighting for time.

"If your honor please, the affront to me and my friend is only a personal matter. But when Señor Lopez affronted this court by trying to make it impossible for me to carry out the court's order, that is something which touches on the court's dignity."

Cazzara eyed them all.

"This is a serious matter," he said. "Under the circumstances, I am compelled to issue the warrant of detention. Capitán Zubiate, you will incarcerate Señor Lopez and hold him to await the further order of this court. We hold you responsible for him."

"This is monstrous — monstrous!" Lopez howled.

His counselor was on his feet beside him.

"This court seems to take upon itself unlimited jurisdiction," he cried. "On the unsupported word of a single man, incarceration of a substantial citizen is ordered—"

"I am quite sure that the Viceroy would find no fault with the court for making a substantial citizen obey the laws as well as a lesser man," Don Carlos purred, giving Cazzara a significant glance.

"The court has spoken!" Cazzara snapped, glaring at Lopez' counselor. "This court knows the limits of its jurisdiction, and does not enjoy having a common counselor question it."

His face a mask, Don Carlos gathered up his papers and helped old Don Antonio to his feet, giving him an arm toward the door. Don José Sentous was close behind them. As they passed, Marocs Lopez' hissed whisper reached Don Carlos' ears:

"I shall not fail the next time, *señor.*"

"You will find me outside when you emerge, *señor,*" Don Carlos said, in a ringing voice. "This court is not the proper place to voice threats. It appears that you insult the dignity of the court every time you open your mouth. One side, *señor!* The stench of jail is on you."

Lopez roared.

His counselor gripped his arms to hold him. "Would you ruin us utterly?" the counselor asked. "There is a proper time for everything."

DON CARLOS walked on with the others, and the court room cleared gradually. Cazzara went into his private quarters and had his bailiff and the bailiff's assistant transfer the gold to Don Antonio's keeping. A moment later, Capitán Zubiate, Lopez and Lopez' counselor joined him.

"Well, Cazzara, what means this?" Lopez demanded. "Have you lost your senses?"

"What else could I do, with the charge made in open court?" the trembling *magistrado* asked. "I tell you, this

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Don Carlos is the Viceroy's man. Unless we move carefully, he will undo us all."

"What is the next thing to be done?"

"Delay," Cazzara advised. "You are under arrest, *amigo*. Capitán Zubiate can take you to his quarters. You need not be put into a cell. You can come and go as much as Zubiate wills, since he is responsible for you. Make whatever plans you desire.

"Do you comprehend? This is a personal accusation made against you by Don Carlos. If, by some strange chance, Don Carlos should not be able to appear to prosecute the charge— But I need not tell you your business, Señor Lopez."

"How he escaped the ship, I know not," Lopez said. "I paid the master well."

"He is a clever man," Cazzara said. "Tell me nothing of your intentions. I would be innocent."

"This judgment today—"

"Tut! Some time in the future, if there is no Don Carlos to prevent, the case may be reopened on some basis. A thought occurs to me."

"A thought is so rare with you, *señor*, that we would appreciate hearing of it," Lopez said.

"When an enemy cannot be vanquished, sometimes it is best to make an ally of him. Perhaps this Don Carlos wants gold and power. Perhaps all this is but a play to demonstrate his abilities. He may desire to belong to the select inner group."

"Ha! That may be the way of it," Lopez said.

"Why not sound him out on it? Zubiate, you are the man for that task. If he desires to be one of us, there is room for him. I would rather have him for friend than for foe. If he refuses, we will know he is the Viceroy's man, and unattainable, and other plans can be made."

"No doubt he awaits me outside with a sword, ready to run me through," Lopez said.

"Tut! You will leave here as the *capitán's* prisoner. I am sure the *capitán* would not let a prisoner be molested. Anyhow, Don Carlos would not wait this long. No doubt he has driven old Don Antonio home."

CHAPTER XV

A LADY SINGS

DON CARLOS had claimed the gold deposited by Marcos Lopez and awarded to Don Antonio by the court, and had put it in his carriage. Don José Sentous left to go to his own home, after making an appointment to meet Don Carlos later.

Don Carlos got into the carriage with his client and ordered Bernardo to drive to Don Antonio's house out by the bay.

The rain had stopped, but billows of fog rolled across the land, and it was a day of discomfort. Smoke hung low on the ground, and the scent of burning wood permeated the air. On the way, Don Carlos related what had befallen him during the night.

"If I could only be young again!" old Don Antonio said, his watery eyes sparkling. "I had some wild moments in my own youth. Carlos, my boy, I wonder if you realize what you have done for me?"

"I have obtained justice for you, Don Antonio, as I hope to obtain it for many others in the future."

"You have done more than that. You have given me new life. My *rancho* was my pride. I spent half my time on it. Now I can have it again. And with the gold you have obtained for me, I can

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repair my house and live as I should."

"I understand, Don Antonio," he said. "It is good to feel adversity lifted from one's shoulders."

"I must live long enough to get my house in order. I must think of my daughter. If I die now, I leave her alone in the world. All our family is gone."

"All mine is gone, too," Don Carlos said.

Then they were silent until the house was reached. Don Antonio insisted that Don Carlos remain for the midday meal, and Bernardo was instructed to go around to the kitchen. Don Carlos and the servant helped Don Antonio up the steps and into the house.

When the meal was ready to be served, the *señorita* and her *dueña* appeared. As they ate, they rejoiced at the court decision, and listened while Don Antonio related in faltering voice the adventures Don Carlos had passed through the night before.

"I was led into a trap like an ignorant boy," Don Carlos confessed, laughing. "But, when I heard that Carmencita was to sing and dance at the *cantina,* I could not remain in the house."

The *señorita* colored slightly.

"Is this Carmencita such a wonderful dancer?" Don Antonio asked.

"One of the best I ever have seen, and I have seen some good ones," Don Carlos replied. "She stirs a man's blood. But it was her singing intrigued me most."

"My daughter sings not badly," Don Antonio observed, with pride. "You must sing for him, Inez."

"I am sure that my poor voice would not compare favorably with that of the famous Carmencita," she replied.

"Your voice could be nothing but charming, *señorita.* I beg you to sing," Don Carlos said.

SO SHE sat in the window seat where the sun slanted through and touched her face; she strummed her guitar and sang. And the song she selected was the old lullaby which she had sung for him in the *cantina* the night Don Carlos had escorted her there.

"Carmencita cannot compare with you, *señorita,*" Don Carlos said when she had finished. "You make a charming picture sitting in the window."

"So like her mother," Don Antonio muttered.

He was falling asleep after the meal and the excitement of the morning, and the old servant tucked more cushions around him and drew the shawl tighter around his shoulders.

Don Carlos strolled over toward the *señorita,* who continued to strum her guitar and eye him dreamily. The *dueña* remained sitting a short distance away and watching them, but on the verge of slumber herself.

"So you got into trouble, *señor,* by going to the *cantina* to see Carmencita?" she asked.

"I feared for her," he said, in low tones. "I gave Señor Pulido a bad moment, when I thought he had arranged for Carmencita to sing and dance."

"I am quite sure, *señor,* that Carmencita will sing and dance no more—at Pedro Pulido's *cantina.*"

"I am rejoiced to hear it."

"I shake every time I think of it," she said. "Discovery would have meant disaster. The shame would kill my father, even if he learned of it now."

"How will he ever learn? Not many know the secret, and those who do never will tell. Will you allow me to say something, *señorita?*"

"If it is within the bounds of propriety, *señor,*" she replied, smiling up at him.

"It is merely that I find you utterly

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charming, that you are the sort of lady of whom my sainted mother would have approved."

"That is a sweet compliment, *señor.*"

"If I am not entirely repugnant to you, *señorita*—"

"Never that, *señor!*" she broke in, quickly. "After you have done so much for us—"

"I mean—not as an advocate, but as a person. A friend. If I am not unwelcome, I should like to have our acquaintance ripen."

"I see no obstacle to that, Don Carlos."

"My house is a lonesome place already, though I have had it but a few days. Like all such houses it needs the feminine touch to make it a home."

"No doubt it will have such some day. You are young and attractive, and a wise advocate—"

"A poor man with my way to make in the world," he interrupted. "I give you a confidence, *señorita.* I was almost down to my last coin when I won at Pedro Pulido's tables."

"But you have ample now," she said, as if this were not news to her. "Your good fortune has begun. And this is a new land, Don Carlos, where industry will accomplish great things for a man."

"As soon as I am substantial enough, I must take a bride to my house."

"It would be a poor bride who would not chance it with you now, *señor*—granted that she loved you."

"A cruel man who would ask it, before he was sure he could offer her security. At some future day, *señorita,* I would speak to you again of my hopes."

"Whenever you please, *señor.*"

"Now that your family affairs have been strengthened materially, no doubt there will be many suitors playing their guitars beneath your boudoir window."

"Those who did not care to do so before our affairs were strengthened need not trouble to do so now, *señor.*"

"When shall I see you again?"

"Perhaps before long. My father undoubtedly will want to visit the *rancho* in a day or so, and may remain there for some time getting things to suit him. Do you think you could find your way there?"

He bent closer to her and lowered his voice. "I could find my way to wherever you happened to be," he replied.

"Ah, *señor!* I find that you are an adept at making pretty speeches."

"The truth is always beautiful, *señorita.*"

THE *dueña* aroused herself and cleared her throat meaningly, and Don Carlos stepped back and bowed to the girl in the window. Old Don Antonio, he saw at a glance, was asleep in his chair.

"Please give your father my respects when he is awake again," he said to the *señorita.* "I must hasten back to Monterey."

She flashed him a parting smile as the old servant let him out the door. Don Carlos hummed a song all the way back to town. Bernardo eyed him once, then gave his attention to the horses. Bernardo, looking into the future, decided that the Mendoza *casa* might soon have a mistress; and he would be given better clothes to wear whenever he drove the carriage, perhaps even a hat with a feather in it.

When the house was reached, Don Carlos found that the sailor was asleep after gorging himself with food and drink. He decided he would rest for a time also. Now that the excitement was over, he felt a reaction. His body was

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sore and bruised from his struggle in the sea.

He undressed partially, salved his bruises, and got into a soft, warm lounging robe. Through the open window, he could hear Bernardo talking to the stable servants below, berating them about something, and later heard his boots thump as he crossed the patio and entered the house.

Don Carlos rested and dozed, and dreamed. Señorita Inez de la Prado held a prominent part in the dream. Don Carlos had been attracted to her strangely from the first, even when he had known her only as Carmencita. Perhaps, he thought, the doubloons had brought her to him, as it had brought gold and a measure of success.

He tried to tell himself again that the doubloons could have no power, that they had merely been sent by some well-meaning friend. His winnings at dice and cards might have been a coincidence, as Fray Luis had said.

But one thing troubled him—the guiding light he thought he had seen on the shore, and which the peon in the hut had declared was not burning. He would ask Fray Luis to explain that.

The knock sounded at the patio gate.

Don Carlos was stretched out comfortably on his couch, still half asleep, when somebody rapped on the door of the chamber. He called a summons to enter, and Bernardo came into the room.

"A visitor, Don Carlos," he announced.

"I am not in the mood for a visitor now."

"I tried to tell him that, but he insists on seeing you at once."

"His name?"

"He is Capitán Zubiate, and he says the matter is of much importance."

CHAPTER XVII

WORD OF A SWINDLER

DON CARLOS was surprised to receive a visit from the *capitán* so soon after the session of the court. He got up from the couch, removed his robe and dressed properly, left the chamber and descended the broad stairs to find Capitán Zubiate standing before an open door with his hands clasped behind his back, looking out into the patio.

"You wished to see me?" Don Carlos asked, his voice frigid.

Zubiate turned to face him, and smiled. Zubiate's smile was such that it put a man on guard more than an inscrutable facial expression would have done. There was in his smile a quality which seemed to expose the disagreeable traits in his character, which seemed to warn than Zubiate was a creature of tricks and schemes, of plots and subterfuges, and that his methods to achieve an end were likely to be unscrupulous.

Zubiate clicked his heels and bowed. "I ask your pardon, Don Carlos, for intruding when no doubt you are fatigued from your efforts in court."

"The case was so clear that my effort was small," Don Carlos replied. "Be seated, *señor*."

"I have a thing of importance to discuss with you, which should be heard by no ears save our own."

Don Carlos gestured.

"We shall not be overheard here by the window."

Zubiate seated himself. Don Carlos clapped his hands for a servant and had wine served, and sat down also.

"First, allow me to congratulate you on the sudden reputation you have gained as an advocate," Zubiate said. "Your victory is the talk of the town."

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"As I remarked, the law was clear in the case. Any advocate could have presented it."

"You belittle yourself, Don Carlos. Any advocate could have presented the law, perhaps, but not every advocate could have handled our *magistrado* as cleverly as did you. He is very much frightened of you, Don Carlos. He thinks you are the Viceroy's private investigator."

"I have not sought to give that impression."

"The Viceroy's private investigator wouldn't," Zubiate observed, smiling. "Let us speak plainly, Don Carlos. That you are a man of worth and ability is easily apparent. Here in this new land, where everything is in the process of formation; where strong men must prevail and plan for the future. You are a strong man."

"If you have no objection, Capitán Zubiate, let us get to the kernel of the nut."

"VERY well. A certain few men have been handling affairs in this vicinity, and intend to continue handling them. They recognize your strength, and would rather have you for a friend than for an enemy."

"The compliment is appreciated," Don Carlos said.

"And the rewards would be large," Zubiate hinted. "What say you?"

"It is possible, *Señor el Capitán,* that I am rather dense or slow to grasp a meaning. I do not know what you are talking about."

"Tut, *señor!* You understand politics, I am sure. You know of conditions hereabouts, also. In strict confidence, I may say to you that I have held speech with His Excellency the Governor. He is rather dissatisfied with our present *magistrado*. He feels sure that Juan Cazzara would be of greater value in some other sphere of endeavor."

"As a *magistrado,* he could be improved on," Don Carlos agreed.

"If Cazzara is removed, the office of *magistrado* will be left vacant. Who is better fitted than yourself to fill it? The fees of the office approximate a thousand pieces of gold a year—the regular fees, I mean. But there are many opportunities, Don Carlos—"

"I doubt it not," Don Carlos broke in. "As I understand it, *señor,* you are now speaking for others, and are offering me the position of *magistrado* here in Monterey if I—shall I say if I render my decisions in such a manner that the others for whom you speak will be pleased?"

Zubiate smiled.

"I think you understand, Don Carlos."

"I understand fully, *señor,*" Don Carlos said, his voice becoming stern. "I understand that you are offering me the opportunity to join with a band of men who resort to thievery, that you are asking me to be a dishonest official. You are at present under my roof, *señor,* so I cannot forget the laws of hospitality and call you properly to account—"

"Softly, Don Carlos," Zubiate said. "Now that you have salved your conscience by expressing your indignation, let us become practical. Marcos Lopez will swallow his loss sustained in the court case, but you are asked to have him released from custody and not prosecuted on the charges you made in open court today."

"I agree to that in a measure, *señor,*" Don Carlos said. "I will allow it to be a personal matter between the man and myself. I will withdraw the charges, but admonish the man to keep out of my

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sight and not make any further attacks on me or my friends."

"*Bueno!* Secondly, if you do not wish to accept the post of *magistrado,* continue to act as an advocate, knowing that your causes will be judged to your advantage in court—as long as you do not try to wreck and ruin the causes in which our group may be interested. And you will find wealth and honors tossed your way."

"If I refuse to join with you?" Don Carlos asked.

"In such case, you will soon find that you have powerful enemies, Don Carlos. But surely you will not refuse."

"I REFUSE," Don Carlos said, simply. "It is an insult, Capitán Zubiate, that you would think for a moment I would accept."

"Then you are the Viceroy's man!"

"I have not said so."

"No need. The Viceroy is quite a distance from here, Don Carlos. He is not present to protect you. Many things could happen to you in this land where you have no powerful friends. And possibly reports will go back to Mexico that certain ill streaks in your character suddenly broke out and predominated—"

"You would defame me?" Don Carlos broke in.

"Possibly. And a dead man cannot defend his honor."

"You dare come here, into my house, and threaten me so?" Don Carlos shouted. "Out at once, *señor!* Before I have my peon servants toss you into the street!"

"Beware, *señor!* You are speaking to the *commandante* of Monterey."

"I am speaking to a slimy swindler and thief who hides behind a uniform."

"You dare talk so to me?" Zubiate raged.

"I dare. Make one move against me, *señor,* and let me learn of it, and I'll disgrace myself and my sword by running you through. And do not doubt for a moment that I can do it."

He clapped his hands, and two servants appeared, men whose bulging eyes betrayed they had been listening. "Show the *capitán* the way out of the house," Don Carlos ordered. "Then burn incense in this room, that the stench may be destroyed."

"Don Carlos, you are writing your own doom!" Zubiate cried.

"Must I ask you again to leave my house? Have you not the slightest sense of decency, *señor?* Go, and take your threats with you. And tell those who sent you here that if they make a move against me I will meet them trick for trick."

Capitán Zubiate clicked his heels and bowed.

"You have had the opportunity, Don Carlos," he said. "If there are ill consequences for you, you have brought them upon yourself. Sometimes when it is difficult to reach a man directly he may be touched through his friends."

"What mean you?" Don Carlos cried.

Capitán Zubiate smiled enigmatically, turned and strode to the door. There he turned and bowed again.

"I almost forgot a certain matter," he said, "a thing which may interest you. No doubt you remember Carmencita, who sang and danced in the *cantina* of Pedro Pulido."

"If so—"

"In my official capacity, I wished to learn the girl's identity. My spies have been busy, and have achieved some success. I believe I can identify the lady now without her mask."

There was a moment's silence; Zubiate stood smiling, triumphantly.

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"How should I be interested?" Don Carlos asked.

"I believe you intimated to me that you were representing the lady's interests. Perhaps we shall have her in the *magistrado's* court."

"Had she transgressed some law?"

"Perhaps not, Don Carlos. But there are other ways to get her into court and make her disclose that she is the Carmencita who danced—say as a witness in some other cause."

"Capitán Zubiate, I doubt very much that you know the identity of the lady," Don Carlos told him. "If by some strange chance you should know it, you are wise enough to think twice before causing her embarrassment."

"Embarrass a *cantina* girl, *señor?*" Zubiate laughed ironically.

"She may sing and dance in a *cantina,* yet be the honest wife of a reputable citizen, *capitán,* compelled to do so to get money. Her conduct—keeping masked, avoiding contact with the patrons, and all that—should convince you she is not an ordinary *cantina* girl."

"Ah, Don Carlos, but I never believed her to be an ordinary *cantina* girl. Quite the contrary. Nor do I think that she is any man's wife. Though you dislike me, give me credit for having a modicum of intelligence."

"The modicum is granted," Don Carlos said.

"I shall be the first to regret it if the lady is in any way embarrassed, or anybody else immediately concerned with her. I take my leave of you, Don Carlos, since it appears we cannot be friends.

"But let me advise that you reconsider your answer to me. If you are one of us, naturally no person in whom you have an interest will be embarrassed."

CHAPTER XVII

ON GUARD, CABALLERO!

BACK in his chamber after Capitán Zubiate had left the house Don Carlos paced around the room and did a deal of thinking.

He understood the *capitán's* threat well. He wondered whether Zubiate really knew that Señorita Inez de la Prado and Carmencita were the same, and feared it was so. Zubiate had clever spies always working for him.

He realized the terrible thing that an exposure would be. The *señorita* would lost caste forever, be held up as a thing of mockery, and the shame of it undoubtedly would kill her aged father. And it would be a blow to all of high caste as well.

Don Carlos wanted to save the Prados from all that. And he felt, honestly, that he had a personal interest also. He admitted to himself that the lady meant a great deal to him, that he had her in mind whenever he was planning for the future.

Zubiate's inference was plain. If Don Carlos joined with the official rogues, the *señorita* would not be embarrassed. If he remained an honest man, the rogues would vent their spleen on him through her and her father. Don Carlos had no wish to surrender his personal integrity, nor did he wish the exposure to occur.

After a time, he ordered that the sailor be brought to him, sending Bernardo to get the man. He lurched into the room, rubbing his eyes. He knuckled his forehead to Don Carlos and grinned.

"Thanks to you, *señor,* for once in my life I have had my full of meat and drink," the sailor said.

"You may continue to have it, if you desire to serve me. I have some

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delicate work you can do. I'll have you fitted with decent clothing, and give you money to spend. You may make your home in the servants' quarters here—"

"What is the name of the man I am to slay, *señor?*" the sailor interrupted.

Don Carlos smiled. "I always slay my own," he replied. "I take a rare pleasure in it. Your work for me will not be difficult, but it will call for some care.

"I have enemies, particularly the Marcos Lopez who had me abducted and taken aboard your ship. I want you to go to a certain *cantina,* eat and drink and spend money—and keep your eyes and ears open in my interests."

"Ha! A task to my liking," the sailor said.

"What is your name?"

"I am called Tomas."

"Drop the hint, Tomas, that you have just arrived in Monterey from San Francisco de Asis. Make easy friends with all you meet. Buy them wine and get them to talk. No doubt you will come across some of the men who work for this Lopez, and they will divulge information. Need I say more?"

"I understand fully, *señor.*"

"Be discreet in reporting anything to me. Let no one know you are associated with me. Bernardo, fit him out with good clothing and give him boots. Then bring him back to me, and I'll give him money to spend."

BERNARDO took Tomas away, and Don Carlos paced around the room again. Dusk came, the candles were lit, and the fisherman came from his hut beside the bay.

"I promised you gold for new equipment, and you shall have it," Don Carlos told him. "But let nobody know I gave it to you. I would be your secret friend. Do you know the *cantina* of Pedro Pulido?"

"*Si, señor.* I go there at times."

"Go there this evening, and each evening following for the present. I'll furnish you with money. Keep your eyes and ears open for any plot against me. If you learn of such, communicate immediately with Bernardo, my body-servant. Do you understand?"

"I understand well, *señor,* and I am glad to do this for you. But there will be one difficulty. They know me around the *cantina* for a poor fisherman who seldom has much money. If I spend freely, they will wonder where I got funds."

"Cross your fingers and tell a little lie in a good cause. Say that you won money on a fortunate fling of the dice, or that fishing has been unusually good."

"I can do it, *señor.*"

"Here is some money, so you can pay your way. There will be more when you need it. I'll see about purchasing a fine boat for you, also nets and other gear."

The fisherman and Tomas left the house together, by the rear way so as not to be seen, and went toward the *cantina.*

Don José Sentous had arranged to call that evening, and he appeared soon after the others had departed.

"I feel as fit as ever, *amigo,*" Don José reported. My early morning bath in the sea had no ill after-effects."

"I am sore and bruised," Don Carlos admitted. "And we may have further adventures. Do not make the mistake of thinking that Marcos Lopez is done with us. To outwit his kind is only to encourage them to fresh devilment. As for me, I also have certain

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other gentlemen who are apt to turn native and try to remove my scalp. I have been both threatened and warned."

"You have run afoul of those in high places, *amigo?*"

"It appears that I have. And one angle of their intrigue worries me. I would tell you of it, but it is something which cannot be shared."

"If you need help, Don Carlos, I am at your service, always."

"This evening, I wish to speak to Pedro Pulido, at the *cantina.*"

"I'll go with you, *amigo.* There is a chance for adventure, and also that Carmencita may sing and dance."

"You admire her so much, Don José?"

"She is adorable," Don José replied. "Perhaps, if you saw her without her mask, if you held speech with her at length, you would change your mind."

"It is possible, of course. But I feel the face behind the mask is all a man can expect, and that she has charm and intelligence also."

Don Carlos called Bernardo to accompany them to the *cantina,* expressing the hope that this time the body-servant would really be on guard. Bernardo had a knife in his belt, and also thrust a loaded pistol into his sash beneath his jacket, where it would not be seen.

THEY walked, for the rain had stopped and a moon drenched the earth. Cautiously they avoided spots favorable for ambush, and neared the *cantina* to hear a din.

"Pedro Pulido must have good business tonight," Don José said. "Traders must be in town from the south. Stakes will be high at the gambling tables."

"And you think perhaps Carmencita will dance?" Don Carlos asked, laughing.

"May it be so!"

They found the big room of the *cantina* crowded. The gambling tables were busy, and men were howling for wine. The musicians were playing, and one of the *cantina* girls was on the stage singing, but her voice scarcely could be heard above the din.

"I must find Pulido and talk to him on a matter of business," Don Carlos said. "Perhaps he is in his private room."

"I'll amuse myself and wait for you," Don José replied.

Don Carlos started down the thronged room. He saw Capitán Zubiate at a table, and some of his troopers scattered around the room. And at another table, laughing and talking to some traders, was Marcos Lopez.

Capitán Zubiate arose and bowed mockingly to Don Carlos as he neared.

"The *magistrado* released Señor Lopez in my custody, until such time as you withdraw your charges legally," Zubiate said.

"I have no complaint to make on that score, *señor,*" Don Carlos replied. "My only complaint is that you see fit to address me in public."

Zubiate's face darkened. "Almost every word you say drives another nail in your coffin, Don Carlos."

"Then it will be securely nailed by the time I die—of old age."

"Are you trying the tables again tonight, Don Carlos? The last time you carried away a store of gold."

"I seldom play games of chance, *señor.*"

"Perhaps you think the fair Carmencita will sing and dance tonight?"

"If she does, *señor,* I will appreciate her artistry."

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DON CARLOS brushed aside and passed on. Marcos Lopez glared at him, but Don Carlos gave no attention. He went on through the crowd to Pulido's little office room, and knocked on the door.

"Enter!" Pulido cried.

Don Carlos entered, and closed the door quickly behind him.

"Ah, Don Carlos! My pigsty is honored," Pulido said. "I have heard whispers of your recent adventures."

"And are likely to hear more, *señor,*" Don Carlos said. "I have information of importance for you."

He sat down and sipped wine, bent across the table and told of his conversation late that afternoon with Zubiate.

"What is to be done, *señor?*" he asked, when he had finished. "We must prevent this exposure. I am not sure Zubiate knows the truth. He may be only playing a game, or may have nothing worse than suspicions. But we cannot risk it."

"Leave the entire affair to me, Don Carlos," Pulido said. "I have been fearing something like this, and have been planning against it."

"If anything goes amiss—"

"Nothing will go amiss, Don Carlos. It would grieve me as much as you to have this come out. It would hurt my business, also. My motives would be misconstrued. Persons of caste would keep away from my place, because they would think me guilty of shaming one of their own kind. Word would get around that my place was frowned on, and other sorts of men would avoid it. But I am thinking first of the *señorita.*"

"Zubiate is in the *cantina* now, and Marcos Lopez also. The *capitán* will be suspicious, I suppose, because I am in here talking to you."

"I seek to buy a piece of property back in the hills, Don Carlos; and I have called you, as an advocate, to ascertain whether the title is good. There is your reason for being here with me now. And that is not subterfuge, but the truth. I'll present the matter to you in a few days."

"*Bueno!* Possibly that saves me a lie."

"And please do not have any anxiety about the Carmencita matter, Don Carlos. As I told you, I have been planning. Those interested never saw Carmencita's face. Even if she was followed to her home, masked, that is not proof that she is the *señorita* we know her to be."

"If you need help, *señor,* call on me," Don Carlos said. "Now I shall rejoin Don José Sentous, who accompanied me here, loiter in the *cantina* for a short time, and take my leave."

"You have no itch for gambling this evening?" Pedro Pulido asked.

"No, *señor.* Nor any evening."

"I rejoice to hear it, Don Carlos. As an advocate, you no doubt will have more causes to defend now than time to defend them. There has been much rejoicing in some quarters over the way you defeated Marcos Lopez. But beware of him, Don Carlos. He is a snake."

"I shall be on guard against him, *señor,* as well as against others. *Buenas noches!*"

"*'Notches!*" Pedro Pulido replied, bowing.

CHAPTER XVIII

A MAD MAN IS FREE

DON JOSÉ SENTOUS had seated himself at a little table near the wall, and had ordered wine. He was served, and lifted his goblet to drink. Over the rim of the cup, his eyes met

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those of Juanita, the *cantina* girl.

She flushed and smiled at him, and smiled yet again when he beckoned her, and seemed radiantly happy when he asked her to sit with him.

The girl's adoration made Don José nervous. He knew her for what she was; but, though she had a sort of wild beauty, he never sought to take advantage of her infatuation for him.

"I have heard stories of what happened to you last night, Don José," she said, in low tones. "I rejoice that you are here tonight, and well."

"I rejoice at it also," Don José said, laughing.

"That detestable Marcos Lopez is at the bottom of it, of course. Why do you not finish him, Don José? He is no better than a beast."

"I do not care to soil my sword, *señorita.*"

"Call me that again," she whispered. "You said it as—as you might have said it to another, to one of your own kind."

"You care too much for little things," Don José said, laughing at her.

"'Tis no little thing, *señor.* A girl of my class cherishes every atom of respect given her, since we know we have so little. I would quit being a *cantina* girl, *señor,* if I could. But what else could I be? I was born in an adobe hut, and my parents gave me nothing but such beauty as I may have. So I ran away with a trader, because he gave me shoes. Just a pair of shoes, *señor,* and not such very good ones at that. And I learned I could dance and sing, and so—"

"I understand, *señorita,*" Don José whispered.

"Perhaps you cannot understand what it means to me, Don José, to let me sit with you and talk so. For you to treat me—well, not as the others do. You have never said a wrong thing to me, *señor.* You have never asked a thing of me."

"I like you," Don José said, frankly. "I wish you could have a different life."

"No man would marry me, not even such as live in a hut. I do not want to starve, *señor.*"

"Why not consider the case with a *fray?*"

"I have, *señor.* And the good *frailes* will have nothing to do with me, for they say I am not a repentant sinner. And how can I be, *señor?* This life—it has given me good clothes, good food, excitement. It has given me so much more than I ever had before. So how can I honestly repent that I have lived it?"

"The argument is beyond me, *señorita,*" Don José confessed.

"I live only for the times I can see you, *señor.* And when you let me talk with you, as you are doing now, it is a cause for rejoicing."

DON JOSÉ did not know what to say. He did not have any great knowledge of the world. He was not even sophisticated enough to pretend to understand when he did not. He lifted his wine goblet again, and drank deeply, replaced the goblet on the table, and looked up to see Marcos Lopez approaching the table.

Lopez evidently had been taking too much wine. He swayed as he walked, and his eyes were bloodshot and blazing. He came to a stop a pace from the table and stood with his fists planted against his hips, glaring at Don José.

"So here you are again, Don José Sentous," he said, so that all near could hear. "You are too young to be out at night, *señor.*"

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Don José flushed as rage burned suddenly within him. He put back a foot preparatory to getting up off his stool.

"Bold words, Señor Lopez," he said. "How many ruffians have you at your back tonight, that you dare speak of? Had you not better go about your business of trading, *señor?* I understand you are much poorer since a recent decision in court, and you should try to recuperate your fortune."

"Dios!" Lopez roared. "Stop your tongue, little one, or perhaps I'll slit it. And you, Juanita! Leave this suckling and come to my table."

"I am comfortable here, *señor,"* the girl answered.

"Did you not hear me? Come to my table!"

Marcos Lopez lurched forward and seized her wrist and jerked her to her feet. She gave a cry of rage and pain and wrenched free. Don José was on his feet also, and put out a restraining hand.

"You forget yourself, *señor!"* Don José cried.

Juanita gave a happy cry. Here was a man of caste coming to her rescue, as if she had been a high-born *señorita* protected by every convention. Then her cry turned quickly to one of fear.

Marcos Lopez had whirled aside, his eyes blazing, rage half blinding him. His hand darted to his sash.

"Puppy!" he howled at Don José.

Juanita gave another cry as the knife flashed in the light, as the others at tables nearby began shouting and trying to get back out of the way.

Don José had no time to get his sword out of its scabbard, to protect himself. His breast was there to receive the blade. Marcos Lopez was trying on him the trick which had failed against Don Carlos.

The knife flashed downward with the strength of the arm and shoulder behind it. Don José, in his mad haste to take a step backward and get out his blade, tripped and lurched to one side.

He saw somebody flash before him, heard a cry of horror from some man near, and as he stumbled to his feet a body fell in front of him. The *cantina* girl had sprung in front of him to take Marcos Lopez' knife in her breast.

Lopez recoiled as a realization of what he had done came to him.

"An accident . . . she jumped in front—" he began mouthing.

MEN surged forward, and Lopez was thrust back as Capitán Zubiate fought to get through the crowd. Don José knelt quickly and lifted Juanita in his arms. Her eyes opened, and she tried to smile.

"You saved me," Don José said.

"You have much to live for, *señor*—and I have not," she muttered.

"Send for a physician, and a *fray!"* Don José cried at those about him. He bent over her again. "You must live."

"It is better that I do not, *señor.* I have changed since I have known you. I do not want any more of this sort of life. And there is no other kind for me."

Her head fell to one side as blood gushed from her breast. Somebody knelt and took her from Don José's arms and stretched out the body. Somebody grasped Don José and lifted him, and he saw it was Don Carlos.

Pedro Pulido thrust his way through the crowd.

"Where is the murderer? Stop him!" he cried.

"One moment, Señor Pulido!" Capitán Zubiate's stern voice cut through the din and silenced those nearest. "I am putting you under arrest."

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"You—putting me under arrest? For what?" Pulido cried. "I did not do this, *capitán*. Did you not see? I saw it from the door of my office."

"And I am dispersing your patrons and closing this place immediately," Zubiate added.

"Are you mad, *señor?*"

"It is my duty, Señor Pulido, to maintain order in this district. I charge that you operate an establishment where disorder and violence reign. I shall not take you into custody, *señor,* since you are a well known man of property. But I order you to hold yourself in readiness to appear in court."

"I shall be glad to obey, *capitán,* and clear myself of this absurd charge. My place is conducted in an orderly manner, as all know."

"It is? This affair—"

"An attack made by a madman," Pulido said. "I demand his arrest."

"I shall take the demand under consideration," Capitán Zubiate said, smiling faintly. "No doubt the arrest will be made—if you can obtain an order for it from the *magistrado.*"

"The murderer shall not escape!"

"A man of Señor Lopez' standing probably will not suffer much inconvenience over the accidental killing of a *cantina* girl. You would do better to consider your own plight, *señor.* Hold yourself ready to come into court. And bring all your *cantina* employees with you, that they may be questioned concerning the method of conducting this place.

"All of them, Señor Pulido—including the singer and dancer known as Carmencita."

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

Red meat for the orchids

***Sounds silly, doesn't it?* Yet from the slimy, gloomy swamps of the tropics come persistent rumors of plants that can—*and do*—eat meat . . . *plants that trap insects . . . small mammals . . . even humans!* Plants that seem to have the power of thought . . . that can plan . . . even as do the weird flowers described in the startling, eerie story by **H. Thompson Rich** entitled—**"THE BEAST PLANTS"**

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Victory

By ROBERT ARTHUR
Author of "Footsteps Invisible," "Blaze of Glory," etc.

An Argosy Oddity

IN THE ten years since he had lost his soul to that perilous siren, mountain climbing, the one thing Matthews had wanted, with a yearning that was like an unholy passion inside him, was to be first to the top of the Big One.

And now, with only three hundred feet left to go, it looked as if he was going to make it.

He was twenty-nine thousand feet above the world, and mountain fatigue made every foot a sickening effort. Somewhere between him and Camp Six, twenty-five hundred feet below, lay the crushed bodies of Turner and Van Alystine.

They had been climbing unroped, and the treacherous footing—loose debris on overlapping slabs—had done for them. A single misstep had sent Turner plunging into Van Alystine, and they were gone almost before Matthews could turn his head at their cry.

The day had begun with misfortune. They had waked from their restless cold-numbed sleep in the lonely desolation of Camp Six to find that the monsoon had broken unexpectedly, to feel its first breath stirring about them. Then their oxygen apparatus proved to be frozen. After hours of vain effort to make it work, they had decided to continue without it.

Behind schedule, without oxygen, and with the warning wind against their cheeks, they should have had the common sense to go downward to Camp Five, where Banning and Haroldson waited. But the temptation had been too great. They had gone up.

And now Matthews, alone, was covering the last three hundred feet at a slow and painful upward crawl, while the howling wind tried to pluck his ice ax from his hand and snow crystals drove into him like bullets.

It was weariness and excitement that made him drop the ice ax as he pulled himself over the last rocky ledge and almost collapsed to the triangular half-acre of barren granite that upthrust itself into the lonely sky.

The ax slid away down the slope and was lost. He hardly noticed. Triumph swelled within him. All the weariness inside him could not quell his exultation.

"First to the top!" he cried aloud. "You old devil, I've licked you. First man to do it. That's something to make the name of Hank Matthews go down in history, isn't it?"

The monsoon howled about his ears like an angry cry. Somewhere below, the great white plume of snow that stretched away from the south flank

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of the peak must be lengthening and thickening with a deep and ominous roar as the wind rose in velocity. Because of the oncoming dusk and the storm, he could not see it, but he imagined it.

Imagined the companion peaks marching away in giants' ranks to north and south. Imagined all his eye would have encompassed if he had not reached the top hours later than they had planned, in the first dark of evening, with a storm building up.

He could see the rough, humpbacked shape of the peak as he lay in a rock hollow, protected from the wind. And he felt loneliness pressing in on him here, where no other man had ever been, twenty-nine thousand feet in the sullen sky.

He would have liked to lie still and hug his triumph to him, turn it over in his mind, savor it to the utmost. But the instinct of the mountaineer would not let him. Even in the first instant of his triumph his mind had been busy estimating his chances of getting down to Camp Five, at twenty-four thousand, where Banning and Haroldson waited. Or even to Six, at twenty-seven thousand, where he and Turner and Van Alystine had spent the previous night.

Matthews turned about, crawled to the edge, peered down. Only two thousand feet or so. But the overlapping slabs that had gotten his companions were waiting, and he would have to feel his way inch by inch.

He shrugged. It could be done.

MATTHEWS was a squat man, not handsome, but his deep chest and powerful physique had enabled him to endure in the cold and oxygen-lacking air this long. He had imagination, but he was not a coward.

"May not make it, Mat," he told himself aloud, though the wind tore his words away so that he could not hear himself saying them. "Though I think you will. But you've done it, and that'll stand to your credit until Judgment Day. If you get down, you'll be famous. And if you don't, you'll leave your record, and the next man up will know that you—"

Something brought him up short, stiffened his body, dropped his jaw.

You'll leave your record!

But how? Some tiny voice in his mind cried the question. How would he leave upon this eternally frozen granite some sign of his presence? He had nothing to leave! Not even a trinket. Not even his ice ax. They had discarded every surplus ounce at Six, before the climb. Even the oxygen apparatus had been jettisoned. He could have left that. But—

And then Matthews knew. Knew that if he left anything of his clothing, he would certainly die without ever getting down. And there was no loose rock on this wind-swept barreness with which to build a cairn. No paper on him for a message. Nothing. He could not leave behind him any proof that he had been here.

Abruptly he crawled back to his protected hollow to think this thing through. The monsoon screamed above him in hoarse triumph, and Matthews lay flat beneath its violence, considering.

How would he leave his record—the mark that would endure to prove his triumph someday, even if he himself vanished on the downward climb? Or that would serve to vindicate him eventually before a world that might—that probably would—scoff at his tale until the proof was forthcoming?

For if he came down from the moun-

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tain alone, with only his word to say he had reached the top—well, even Banning and Haroldson would be sceptical. For Turner hadn't made it, and Van Alystine lay dead with him, and they were rated better climbers than Hank Matthews.

And when the question was asked—how he, Matthews, succeded alone when they had failed—what could he answer?

Nothing, and Matthews knew it. If he reached safety, the ugly shadow of doubt would forever mar his achievement. And that, somehow, would be worse than to have failed in the first place.

For minutes longer he lay there, burning pain in his throat rising anew with each indrawn breath of the thin, dry air. And then he knew he could wait no longer. He had to start now, if he ever hoped to descend alive.

He rose and crawled through the rushing wind and the hurrying sting of the snow to the edge. The rest had strengthened him. Somehow, as he pushed himself over the lip of rock and with his feet found holds on the downward slope, he felt he was going to make it. To Six at least. And tomorrow he'd reach Five, where Banning and Haroldson would be waiting for him.

Half by feel, half by sight, he began the descent, moving with the almost automatic sureness of the experienced mountaineer, his mind busy on the story he would tell.

"Turner and Van Alystine slipped and fell. I went on alone, I made it to within three hundred feet, and then I had to turn back."

That was it. That was what he would say. They'd believe him then. The whole world would believe failure, and acclaim it, where no one would believe success. *I made it to within three hundred feet*— Yes, that had the ring of truth to it. That's what he had to say. And his victory then would be his own, to cherish in secret, untarnished, clean and sweet.

He was down now at the bottom of the first three-hundred-foot stretch, and he looked back. The crown of the mountain was almost hidden from sight by the slashing snowflakes, and the guttural roar of the wind as it tore at the rock above was like an angry growl. Like the mountain's angry growl.

Matthews grinned and slapped a cold granite slab familiarly.

"Beat me, didn't you?" he asked. "Know I can't tell, don't you? But I've beaten you, too, and that's something else you know. And won't forget. I climbed you. I got to the top. We'll always know that, you and me. We'll know, and that's what counts."

Then he began again the difficult and dangerous downward climb.

DEATH BELOW ZERO

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THEODORE ROSCOE

Coming in the Argosy for April 20

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MEN of
HEROES FOR HUMANITY
EACH GENERATION CONTRIBUTES A LITTLE BAND OF UNSUNG HEROES WHO LABOR DANGEROUSLY TO RELIEVE THE SUFFERING OF THEIR FELLOW MAN.
DR. CHARLES VAILLANT, FRENCH PIONEER IN HARNESSING RADIUM AND THE X-RAY TO THE BENEFIT OF MANKIND, GAVE BOTH ARMS AND LATER HIS LIFE. HE WAS AWARDED THE CRAVATE OF THE LEGION OF HONOR AND OTHER MEDALS; BUT HE WAS PREVENTED FROM RECEIVING A 15,000-FRANC PRIZE, BECAUSE BEING ARMLESS, HE WAS UNABLE TO SIGN THE REQUIRED RECEIPT.
Charles Vaillant
DR. ROLLA E. DYER, OF THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF HEALTH, STRAPPED A CAGE OF RAT FLEAS TO HIS LEG. HE WAS DELIGHTED WHEN HE CAUGHT TYPHUS FROM THE BITE OF AN INFECTED FLEA—FOR HE HAD DEMONSTRATED HOW MAN WAS BEING INNOCULATED WITH THE VIRUS.

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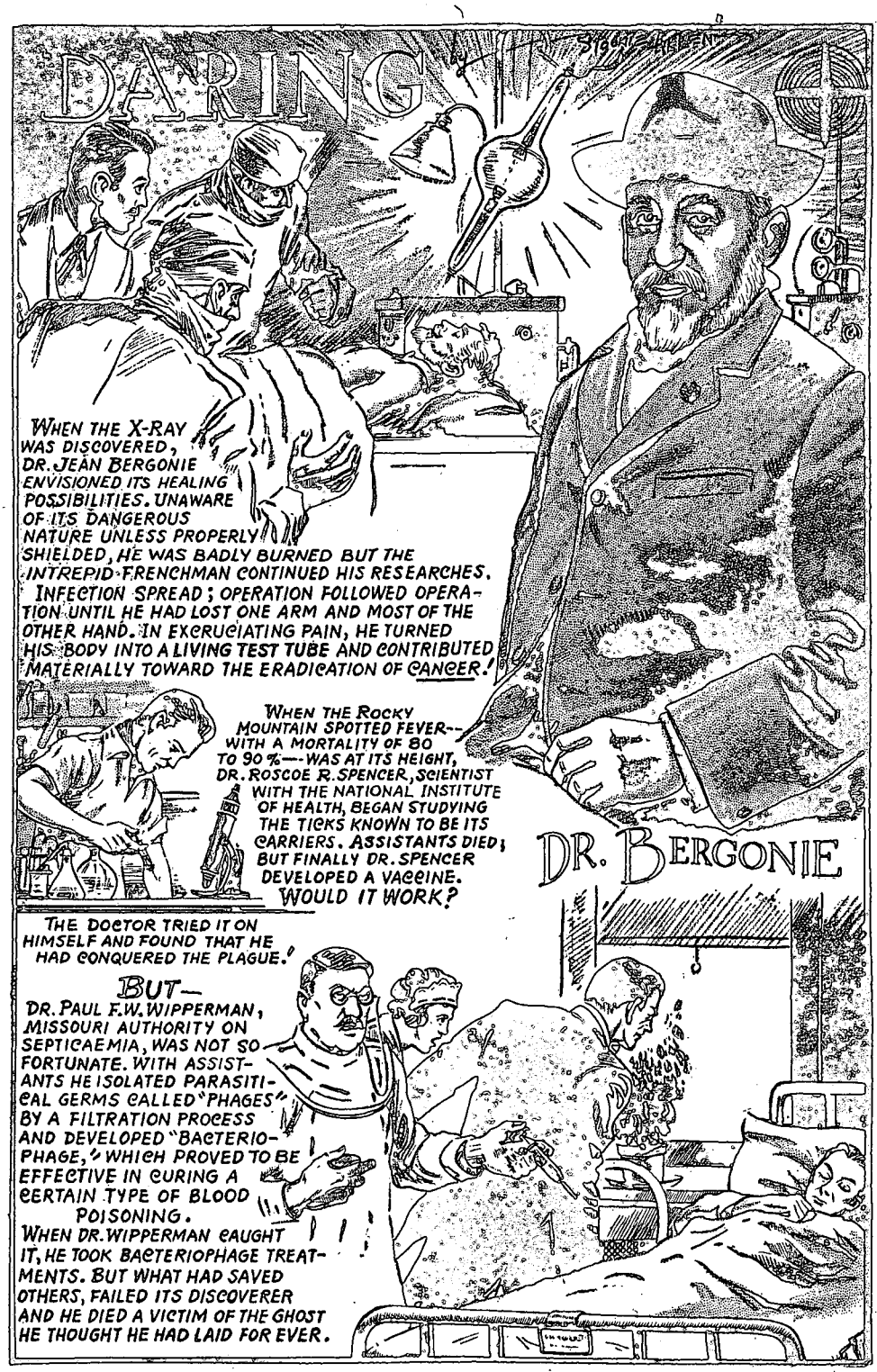
DARING
WHEN THE X-RAY WAS DISCOVERED, DR. JEAN BERGONIE ENVISIONED ITS HEALING POSSIBILITIES. UNAWARE OF ITS DANGEROUS NATURE UNLESS PROPERLY SHIELDED, HE WAS BADLY BURNED BUT THE INTREPID FRENCHMAN CONTINUED HIS RESEARCHES. INFECTION SPREAD; OPERATION FOLLOWED OPERATION UNTIL HE HAD LOST ONE ARM AND MOST OF THE OTHER HAND. IN EXCRUCIATING PAIN, HE TURNED HIS BODY INTO A LIVING TEST TUBE AND CONTRIBUTED MATERIALLY TOWARD THE ERADICATION OF CANCER!
DR. BERGONIE
WHEN THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN SPOTTED FEVER--WITH A MORTALITY OF 80 TO 90%--WAS AT ITS HEIGHT, DR. ROSCOE R. SPENCER, SCIENTIST WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF HEALTH, BEGAN STUDYING THE TICKS KNOWN TO BE ITS CARRIERS. ASSISTANTS DIED; BUT FINALLY DR. SPENCER DEVELOPED A VACCINE. WOULD IT WORK?
THE DOCTOR TRIED IT ON HIMSELF AND FOUND THAT HE HAD CONQUERED THE PLAGUE.
BUT—
DR. PAUL F.W. WIPPERMAN, MISSOURI AUTHORITY ON SEPTICAEMIA, WAS NOT SO FORTUNATE. WITH ASSISTANTS HE ISOLATED PARASITICAL GERMS CALLED "PHAGES" BY A FILTRATION PROCESS AND DEVELOPED "BACTERIOPHAGE," WHICH PROVED TO BE EFFECTIVE IN CURING A CERTAIN TYPE OF BLOOD POISONING.
WHEN DR. WIPPERMAN CAUGHT IT, HE TOOK BACTERIOPHAGE TREATMENTS. BUT WHAT HAD SAVED OTHERS, FAILED ITS DISCOVERER AND HE DIED A VICTIM OF THE GHOST HE THOUGHT HE HAD LAID FOR EVER.

Coming soon: Smedley D. Butler—Fighting Quaker

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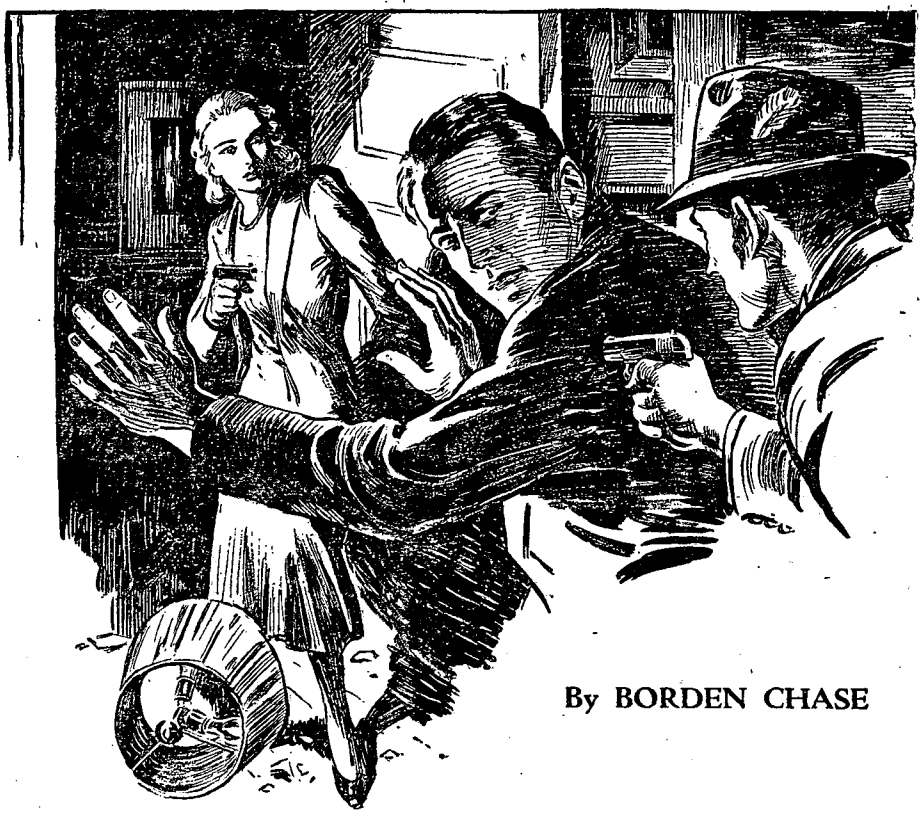
The Sun Sets At 5



By BORDEN CHASE

SMOOTH KYLE'S search for the mysterious Center, head of a vast espionage network in America, and his effort to prevent the theft of a newly developed U. S. Army bomb-sight, led him into a maze crisscrossed with invisible swastikas and generously peppered with bullets.

With the help of GILDA GARLAND, shrewd of wit and sharp of tongue, Smooth has discovered that JACQUES BOVILLE'S Club Yvonne is one of the undercover meeting places for Center's agents. Whether Boville himself is involved is not yet clear. But from NADJA SHERENE, lovely Hollywood import from Vienna, whom he meets there, Smooth learns many interesting things.

Nadja admits that she is one of Center's tools. So are MARIE ROUBARD, the orchestra leader; FREDERICK, the headwaiter; and OTTO BERGEN, a waiter—all of the Club Yvonne. Nadja insists that she is working for Center only because her brother is being held as a hostage in a Viennese concentration camp. In spite of Gilda's skepticism, Smooth believes her and promises help.

THE OUTLINES of Center's plan begin to emerge. Having obtained a hold on MARK HESSON, an official in a freighter line, Center has arranged that the sailing of the *Malay Princess* be held up until Hesson receives instructions. Hesson is also to furnish a sea-going tug, for what purpose neither Smooth nor Hesson can imagine.

Nadja is to learn from young LIEUTENANT HODKINS when the bomb-sight test-flight is to be made. A mechanic, ENGEL, whose brother is held by Center's men, is to put a small time-bomb in Hodkin's plane, damaging the ignition and forcing a landing.

Hesson, Nadja, and Engel all agree to go through with their parts of Center's arrangements, and to tip off Smooth when the time comes. Smooth persuades the Secret Service and the Department of Justice to let him play it his way.

This story began in the Argosy for March 2

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SMOOTH has gotten in touch with Engel by intercepting a message to Center that was to be passed through Marie Roubard. He has also learned that Engel is to receive his pay, as well as the address of the place where his brother is being held, at Marie's apartment. So Smooth goes back to the Club Yvonne to see what he can find out from her.

Covertly, too, he keeps an eye on the waiter, Otto Bergen, who Boville says had brought many influential people to the club and is one of Columnist DAVE HALEY'S shrewdest tipsters.

After closing time, Marie joins Smooth at the bar for a drink. She warns him to leave the club at once, then whispers, "No—it's too late!"

Smooth looks up to see eight armed men enter the room. They are not, Smooth decides, professional gunmen, but trigger-happy amateurs, and probably members of Center's Group.

Boville signals Smooth that he is going to try to douse the lights. Smooth braces himself against the bar. Then he gives Boville the nod and lunges forward. . . .

CHAPTER XXI

ETIQUETTE AFTER MIDNIGHT

THE lights blacked out and Otto Bergen yelled. Smooth thanked him for that. Thanked him with a shot that might have been just a little high. There was a cork mat on the floor behind the bar and Smooth's feet had slipped when he landed. Not enough to excuse a complete miss. He tried again, just to be sure, and the flare of his gun showed him another mark.

One of the Group men had seen too many movies of gangsters who stood erect and shot it out with their enemies. He was doing it now in the very best style. Smooth tried a fast one at his chest, dropped to his knees and scurried toward the far end of the bar.

There were shouts. A gun crashed. Then another. The backbar mirror split and showered glass over the array of bottles. One of the Group men emptied his gun and Smooth grinned as he counted the shots. Six fast ones. That was panic. Smooth had often wanted to do the same. There was a long silence. Then a man screamed—that high, frightened cry that tells of a knife going home. Smooth recalled that Jacques Boville had never carried a gun. Jacques had once belonged to the crowd that liked knives—shivemen, in the jargon of those who travel at night. Shivemen are at their best in the dark.

Smooth's outstretched hand touched a shoe. Then a trouser leg. He lined up his gun and moved forward. His hand touched the starched short jacket worn by the bartender. The man was flat on the floor, waiting for the storm to blow over.

"Stay put," whispered Smooth, and crawled toward the end of the counter.

He found a box of empty bottles and lifted one carefully. It was an old gag but good enough to use on amateurs. Smooth tossed the bottle toward the far end of the room. He grabbed another and threw that at the opposite wall. Again the guns fired. Smooth lifted his head above the bar and tried a quick one at the nearest flash. Why not? He had nothing to lose.

It was a safe bet Jacques was in the clear. Except for the waiters near the kitchen door, it was open season on anyone in the room.

It couldn't last much longer. Soon, one of those chumps would remember that alcohol burns. There was plenty of it splashed along the bar. A flaming box of matches tossed onto the counter would make the Club Yvonne an unhealthy place for all concerned.

Smooth found the opening and crawled quietly across the room. No use trying the front door. Even a Group man would know enough to block that. And they were talking now—calling

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each other by name and giving instructions. One offered to light a match. Another warned him against it. Smooth figured the guy was born lucky.

Soon he reached the passageway that led to the rear yard. A siren sounded in the street and Smooth knew the Group men would make their last bid.

He tossed an ashtray toward the bar to start them off. As the guns cracked again he scrambled to his feet and ran along the narrow hall, trying to judge the distance to the rear door. He guessed wrong and almost jammed his outstretched hand through the wooden panel. His fingers were numb when he found the knob and twisted.

The door swung out and Smooth saw the figure of a man outlined against the dim light in the rear yard. He crouched and a gun slammed just above his face.

"Always try for the chest, Fritz," he said, and followed his own advice.

It was a hit. Maybe good—maybe bad. Smooth didn't wait to learn. He ran across the narrow yard that Jacques used as a garden restaurant during the summer months, pushed his gun back in the leather and jumped for the fence.

There was wire strung along the top and one of the barbs nicked his hand. Another took a strip out of his trouser leg as he went over. He pushed clear and jumped. One foot landed on a garbage can and he sprawled face down in a litter of newspapers and tin cans.

A window went up and a woman's voice called: "Who is it? What are you doing down there?"

"Only the Fuller Brush man," said Smooth. "Lady—you ought to make your husband clean up this yard!"

HE RAN toward the glass paneled door at the rear of the house, put his heel through one of the panes and reached inside to turn the key. There was a light switch near the door and Smooth snapped it.

He found himself in a wide kitchen with a red tile floor and an old iron range. Across the room was an open door that led to a hall. Smooth ran toward the front of the house. Like others of the brownstone era its servant's entry was built under the wide stone stairs. An inner door was locked and beyond it was an iron gate. Smooth closed both the door and the gate behind him, stepped onto the street and walked quickly toward Sixth Avenue.

The night was full of sound. Police whistles, sirens, shouting men and howling women. Smooth reached into his pocket, found a handkerchief and bound the cut in his palm. He brushed the dust and some of the dirt from his coat, wondered if Jacques would have sense enough to recover Smooth's hat, and hailed a taxi. It was occupied and Smooth kept walking. He turned south on Sixth Avenue and made a wish that the Group men would be stupid enough to shoot it out with the cops.

One thing puzzled him. Or at least, he had added one more thing to the many that puzzled him. Why had Marie Roubard warned him?

It didn't add up. Neither did the look he had seen in her eyes when she left the Club Yvonne. Marie might have been acting, but Smooth could have sworn the girl was ready to cry. Frightened? Yes. But not for herself.

He tried to guess but his head hurt and his hand hurt and he'd been doing so much guessing in the past few hours he decided enough was enough. This time he would let Marie do the guessing.

He glanced at the card that carried her address, walked to Fiftieth Street

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and turned east. The house was much like the one he had just left—a brownstone with a wide flight of stone stairs leading from the sidewalk. Many of these old places had been subdivided into apartments, and judging from the looks of this he would find more than one bell in the entry.

Smooth climbed the stairs and tried the outer door. It was open and he walked into the vestibule. There were three brass letterboxes that had been built into the wall above a set of bell buttons. The last carried a neat card with Marie's name on it.

Smooth decided to ring the bell. Then he decided not to. Marie might have company and Smooth had no intention of interrupting any conversations. Not if he could listen in. And if there was one place in New York where he would not be expected—this was it.

He went down to the servant's entry and tried the brass knob in the gate. It was locked. A wide iron panel prevented anyone from slipping a hand past the bars of the gate to reach the inner knob. It didn't prevent Smooth from taking off his necktie, dropping a loop under the inner knob and hauling the tie taut. He eased off on one end of the tie as he pulled the other. The knob turned and he swung the gate open. The inner door was glass-paneled and Smooth wished he had a sheet of fly paper. He tried each of his keys in the lock and got exactly nowhere. And this entry had to be quiet. Again he wished he had some fly paper. Or a roll of adhesive tape. That would do the trick.

He left the iron gate ajar and walked to the corner. There was a cab parked at the curb. The hackman looked at Smooth and grinned one of those wise grins sober men reserve for drunks.

"Take you home, mister?" he asked.

"Yeah," said Smooth. He lurched. If the hackman wanted a drunk, he could have one. "Firsh we go to a drugstore. Whersh one?"

"Climb in and we'll look. There's none open here but we might find one uptown."

"Never mind that shruff," said Smooth. He waved a hand wisely. "If you can't find one downtown, shome other guy can."

There was disappointment in the hackman's face. "Climb in. We'll stop at the one at Forty-eighth and Sixth."

THEY rolled south, waited for a light and then pulled to a stop in front of an all-night drugstore. Smooth handed the driver two dollars. "Adhesive tape. Get a big, big roll," he said stupidly. "Better get two rolls. I need 'm."

The driver took the bills, walked into the drug store and talked with the clerk at the counter. Smooth heard them laugh. Then the driver returned, handed Smooth two large rolls of tape and climbed onto his seat.

"Where to?" he asked.

"Back where we wash," said Smooth. "Thash were I live. Right on th' corner."

"Hunh!"

It was a rough ride and Smooth grinned. If he'd been driving he would have done the same. Probably worse.

The cab slammed to a stop and the driver opened the door. Smooth tossed him a bill and wandered unevenly toward the brownstone house. He stepped into the servant's entrance, closed the gate behind him and took the cover from one roll of tape. He ripped off a short piece and patched the cut in his hand. Then he tore longer strips and pasted them over the lower panel of the door.

When the glass was completely cov-

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ered he took out his gun and tapped the butt lightly against the pane. It split, but the tape deadened the sound and kept the glass from falling. Smooth peeled the tape from the door, taking the glass with it. He reached inside, twisted the key and turned the knob. Quite easily done.

The hall was dark and he walked through to the kitchen. The rear door was bolted. He unfastened the bolt and stepped into the yard. Above his head was the iron balcony of a fire escape. The lower ladder was hinged and held out to reach by a counterweight. Smooth went back into the kitchen, found a push broom and used it to reach for the ladder. The hinges were rusty and they squeaked. Smooth hoped the neighbors were sound sleepers. He hauled down on the broom and the ladder squeaked again.

There were more squeaks when he climbed. Still more when the ladder swung back into place. Smooth crouched on the lower balcony and drew a deep breath. No windows were opened. No women asked questions. He grabbed the sides of the next ladder. The family on the second floor were amateur gardeners. Smooth eased his way through a melon vine that was dry and brittle. He climbed past a dozen empty flower pots and wondered what Marie had planted on her balcony.

A tomcat took this minute to challenge a rival. Smooth froze. The rising howl floated over the yards and was answered. Soon the duet became a trio.

Smooth looked into the darkened window of the top floor apartment. He tried the sash. It was locked, and again he took out the roll of adhesive tape. While the back fence trio grew to a quartet, he pasted strips carefully along the pane, tapped it out and unfastened the catch. The room was large and empty. Empty, that is, of any living thing. There was plenty of furniture and Smooth's foot found an end table that held a tall glass vase.

The vase teetered and Smooth put his arms about it. He steadied it on the table and turned to glance about. There was a single bed against the far wall. A vanity table was near it and across the room was a bureau and an easy chair. The door was closed and there was a heavy rug on the floor. The place held a pleasant odor of perfume and cosmetics.

Smooth crossed the room and listened. He heard footsteps on an uncarpeted floor and then the rattle of dishes.

That ought to mean kitchen.

He turned the knob slowly and eased open the door. The short hall was dim with light that came from the next doorway. He heard the jingle of silverware and then the words of a French song. Marie's voice wasn't bad. It wasn't particularly good, either. But it told Smooth she was alone. Women don't try for high notes they can't reach when anyone is listening. Unless it's a husband.

Smooth didn't think Marie had a husband around. She wasn't the type to whip up coffee and toast while a husband read the morning papers. He waited until the song ended. Marie walked across the kitchen. She said, "Damn!" and Smooth figured the coffee pot was hot. He heard it go back onto the stove and decided he could stand another cup of coffee.

He ran one hand over his hair, lifted the other to straighten his tie and realized it was in his pocket. Very unconventional. He stepped forward into the doorway.

"Do you mind if I have mine without cream?" he said quietly.

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CHAPTER XXII

STORY ABOUT A PATRIOT

MARIE dropped the sugar bowl. Her hands went to her mouth and her eyes widened. Pretty eyes. She was very feminine, without the mannish dinner jacket that was her costume at the Club Yvonne. She was wearing a soft blue negligee of dull crepe and lace. Her hair was tousled about her ears and she had taken most of the rouge from her lips. Her feet were in tiny blue high-heeled mules, and she stamped one of them impatiently as she stared at Smooth.

"I might have known it was you!" she said.

"Why?"

"Who else could it be?"

"I give up," said Smooth. He seated himself at the kitchen table. "Who, for instance?"

She looked at him for a moment, then turned and walked to a china closet above the porcelain sink. She took down a second cup and saucer, filled it with coffee and set it on the table. She pointed to the sugar cubes that had spilled across the checkered cloth.

"Help yourself," she said.

"What—no toast?"

Marie pointed to an electric toaster. "There'll be some in a minute. Don't let it burn. I'll be back soon as I fix my hair."

She started toward the door but Smooth put out his hand. "I like it better the way it is," he said quietly. "It sets off your eyes."

"My eyes are a sight!"

"They suit me."

"You're being rude, Smooth."

"Maybe," he said. "But I'm being careful, too." He shook his head wearily. "I've had enough guys shooting at me for one night, Marie. Be nice and sit down."

She put one hand under his chin, lifted it and smiled down at him. "They told me you were crazy and I'm beginning to think they were right. How did you ever manage to get out of the club alive?"

"Never mind me," said Smooth. "Let's talk about *they*. Or better still—let's talk about you. Why did you tip me about that crowd at the club?"

"Because I didn't want you to get killed."

"Why not?"

"Perhaps I like you," said Marie. She sat at the table and loked at him across her cup. "You can't hate a girl for that, can you?"

"The profile again. Mother always told me I was too beautiful to go to the big city."

"Stop clowning," said Marie. She buttered the toast and pushed the plate toward Smooth. "No girl would ever look twice at you on a crowded street. But you're not a bad guy, Smooth. Much too nice to get yourself killed."

"And you're going to keep me alive?"

"I'm going to try."

"Center won't like that."

She laughed. "Was that supposed to throw me?"

SMOOTH borrowed her spoon to stir his coffee. "Not exactly. But it was the best I could do on short notice. Suppose we both stop pretending and see what happens. Me, I think you're the most dangerous bit of bric-a-brac in this town. If my head didn't hurt I could think of a dozen reasons to keep far, far away from you."

"Then why come here?"

"To look at your eyes."

"Do you like them?"

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"Not as much as I did when you stood next to me at the bar," said Smooth. He dunked a slice of toast and looked at it thoughtfully. "You were frightened then. Do you want to tell me why?"

"I've already told you—I want you to keep alive."

"How do I do that?"

"First," said Marie slowly, "you make up your mind that Center is too smart for you. Then you call Professor Strickland and tell him he'll have to put someone else on this case. There's a phone in my bedroom but I wouldn't advise you to use it, even though Strickland does get every call that goes over it. Center uses the same system."

"Keep talking."

Marie smiled. "That's all there is to tell, unless you want to give me the message you took from the club tonight."

"What message?"

"The one that was on the piano score—written in Braille."

Smooth coughed. The coffee went down the wrong throat and he coughed again. His eyes watered and he reached for his handkerchief. It was damp with the blood that had come from the cut in his hand. Marie reached forward and put her own small kerchief to Smooth's nose.

"Blow, darling," she said. "Then take a deep breath and you'll feel better."

"A fine way to treat a guest!" said Smooth when he had wiped the tears from his eyes. "Why didn't you let me choke? It would have been easier."

"But you did steal the piano score, Smooth. My man is too good an arranger to deliver a number without a piano part."

"I suppose so," said Smooth wearily. He rested his head on his hands and stared at the table. "There ought to be a law against dames. The more beautiful they look, the more trouble they make. Everything was going fine until I came up here. Suppose I jump out the back window and we both pretend it didn't happen?"

Marie's laugh was low. She reached forward and put her hand on Smooth's cheek, patted it lightly and laughed again. "Suppose we stop trying to outsmart each other and see what we can do about keeping that bomb-sight from going to Europe. Don't you think that would be better?"

Smooth looked up. "Don't I *think?*" he said slowly. "Lady, the answer is easy. I'm getting so numb I can't even *feel!* While I'm still conscious—tell me, why don't you want that bomb-sight to go to Europe?"

"Oh, that's very simple. I don't want it to be used on planes that may bomb my mother's home. You see, I was born in Alsace-Lorraine. My family still lives there."

"And you were educated in Berlin. You got new ideas, went to work for Center and came here to make my life miserable!"

"But I had to."

"Please!" cried Smooth. "Please, lady! Don't tell me they've got *your* brother in a concentration camp! That story is being worked to death!"

Marie laughed. "My story is much less complicated. You're probably too young to remember about the last war, but if you were older and—"

"I was a gunner's mate in the last war, angel," said Smooth. "Don't let my girlish laughter fool you."

"But you don't look old enough, Smooth."

"That's what the enlistment officer told me when I tried to sign up in 1917. It cost five bucks to get a pal of mine

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to change the date on my birth certificate. He did a rotten job but it was good enough to fool the officer. Now you take it from there and tell me what I should remember about the last war."

"Simply this," said Marie. "The French and British espionage services had agents in this country during nineteen fourteen, fifteen and sixteen. They tried to prevent much of the sabotage that took place and were successful quite often. Of course, they couldn't work in the open. America was neutral. And if a French agent was caught, he had to be treated the same as an agent from Germany. After America went into the war, the services worked in conjunction."

"Why dig that up?"

"BECAUSE the same condition exists today. Any French or English agents caught working in America would be jailed or sent out of the country. No matter what the sympathies of the people may be, the United States is a neutral country. In order to keep out of this war it has to protect its neutrality. It could not, and would not allow a French agent to work here."

"Comes the dawn," said Smooth. He looked sharply at Marie and grinned. "You're trying to tell me you're a French agent—is that it?"

"Oh, I couldn't think of doing such a thing," she answered. "You're a Federal agent, and if you *knew* I was working for France, it would be your duty to arrest me." She lifted her cup and looked into it thoughtfully. "Still, if you merely *suspected* I was working for France, it might make a good many things clear to you."

"It might," said Smooth, "but it doesn't! And it doesn't add up with what I've already learned."

"Maybe I can make it add up."

"Maybe you can," said Smooth. "But you're going to have a tough time explaining why you put the finger on three manufacturers who were authorized by the government to make parts of the bomb-sight. Each of them talked to you, and each was told to come through with information—or else!"

Marie's shrug was an answer in itself. "What could I do? It had taken years of patient work by the French Government to place me in Center's organization.

"As a child, I had been sent to Berlin. Because of my music, I was accepted as a student in the conservatory. I was told to forget all the friends I had known in my childhood. I lived with Germans, talked only with Germans, spent all of my time with them and became known only as a German.

"When the Nazi party moved into prominence, I became a member. I did my share of propaganda work and was finally trained to do espionage. I came to America, took out my citizenship papers and waited for further orders."

"And all this—for France?"

"I would die for France," said Marie simply. "It is my country, just as America is yours. Perhaps you consider me a cheat—a thief who steals from the land that gives me my bread. *Cela ne fait rien*— It does not matter. I consider myself a soldier."

Smooth looked long at the girl who faced him across the table. If she was telling the truth, here was a brand of patriotism that made his own look pale. True, Smooth had worked on cases that had taken him half way around the world. He had traveled for months, knowing that death might be just around the next corner. But always the case had come to an end. Always he had come home to live with his own people in a land that he loved.

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Marie Roubard had been assigned to a case as a child. It had taken her to Germany and now to America. It went on, and on—always dangerous and with never an end in sight.

"And now," he said at length, "Center thinks you're one of his agents?"

"Yes."

"You've seen him?"

Marie shook her head. "None of us have seen him. He's the cleverest man in the espionage service—any service! Sometimes I doubt that he's one man. Center might be the name of a dozen or more agents sent to this country at different times. He might be a woman. Anyone! I wouldn't be surprised if he turned out to be one of your own Federal men."

"I would," said Smooth shortly. He rubbed his head and tried to check back over the things he knew to be true of Marie. "How did you actually put the finger on those manufacturers? Who told you to work on them?"

"AN ORDER from Center came on a sheet of manuscript paper," said Marie. "It simply told me to learn when they were going to their homes and how they would travel."

"Who did you pass that along to?"

"When I found that Milton Lefforts was going to fly the morning plane to Chicago, I simply called Number Twenty-eight and instructed him to phone Center at the number I gave."

"Slow it down," said Smooth. "Who is Twenty-eight; how's he called?"

"He's the Chicago agent—one of them, at least. He listens to my broadcast each night, just as some agent does in every large city from here to the coast. I use a musical code to call the agent I want. Then I give the phone number at which Center can be reached. This is never used twice, of course."

Smooth leaned forward. "You mean you had that phone number and didn't use it to grab Center? Why, all you had to do was get the location of the phone, send a man there and—"

Marie laughed. "That's been tried, Smooth. I had one of our men trace the number and he saw my arranger take the call at a booth in a night club. The next evening Otto Bergen took it at the Club Yvonne booth. Then a clerk in a chain drugstore on Eighth Avenue. All of these men were simply secondary agents who had received orders from Center."

"But what was the purpose of the call?"

"Oh, it had a psychological effect. When an agent met Lefforts at the airport, it proved to the manufacturer that he was up against a big-time combination. The same kind of pressure applied over and over will break down almost any man."

"Nice work," said Smooth quietly. "And all you've got for it is a list of numbers and the names of a few two-bit agents in New York."

"A little more than that," said Marie. "We've located all the out-of-town agents whose numbers I've called. Your Department is welcome to their names but it would be stupid to pick them up. Center would put others in their places. This way, your counter-espionage service can keep them under watch."

Marie went to the refrigerator and opened the door. Smooth watched her take one of the ice trays and hold it under the cold water tap. When the cubes dropped into the sink she took a thin, rubberized envelope from the bottom of the tray and tossed it onto the table.

"There's the list," she said casually. "Put it in your pocket. I've got a duplicate."

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"Where?"

"None of your business." She made a mouth at him and refilled the tray. "After all, a girl has to have some secrets. You might suddenly decide to turn me in to Strickland."

"I wouldn't worry about that," said Smooth. "But I'm still wondering why you want the message I grabbed tonight."

MARIE wiped her hands on one of the small towels near the sink. She put the tray away and closed the refrigerator door. Then she came back to the table and rested one arm on Smooth's shoulder. He looked up at her and she smiled.

"We're right back where we started," she said. "I want to know what was in the original message so I can learn what crazy scheme you're up to. I sent along the one you substituted, but whatever you've planned, it won't work, Smooth—take my word for it. Dozens of our best French agents have tried to outsmart Center.

"You saw what happened to Frederick—he worked for England. Now he's in the hospital and lucky to be alive. We've lost almost a hundred men trying to trap Center. Your own service has lost quite a few. You can't hope to trick him. He knows all about you. Your number went up the first night you walked into the Club Yvonne."

"The hackman?"

"Yes."

"You knew about that?"

"I read the message that was on the menu. Otto Bergen passed it along, but I don't know who printed it." She tightened the pressure of her arm on his shoulder and drew his head against her side. "I didn't know you, and there was nothing I could do to help you but—"

"But what?"

"Oh, nothing—I just didn't like the idea. I don't like it any better now. That's why I want you to quit this case before Center sends some real killers after you. That crowd he used tonight were only a bunch of amateur Groupmen. But next time—"

Her fingers left marks on his shoulder as she tightened her grip. For a moment she stood there, looking down at him wistfully. Then she laughed and sat at the table. "Take it or leave it, Smooth—that's the deal. And now maybe you'd better get out of here before I start telling my right age. You're crazy, but you're easy to like."

Smooth emptied his cup and pushed it toward the back of the table. As he did, a bell sounded in the kitchen and he jumped. He glanced at his wrist watch, then looked quickly at Marie. She was staring at him, her eyes wide in surprise. He motioned toward the hall.

"Expecting company?" he asked.

"No."

"Any idea who it is?"

"Just a guess," she said slowly. "For the first time in my life, I've talked out of turn. It seems that it didn't take Center long to hear about it."

"Dictaphone?"

"No—I've looked the place over thoroughly."

Smooth stood up and loosened the gun under his arm. He sighed and pointed toward the door. "Let them in and we'll sing the chorus again. No use trying to get down the fire escape—they could pick us like apples off a tree."

Marie shook her head. "It may not be that— it *couldn't* be. Center can't work miracles!" She caught Smooth's arm and hurried him into the hall. Started him toward the bedroom.

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"Keep the door partly open. I don't know what to expect but I do know you can help me to handle it."

CHAPTER XXIII

LADY WITH A GUN

SHE pressed the button that would release the catch on the lower door, glanced into a mirror that hung in the hall and pushed a few stray curls away from her forehead. Smooth walked quickly to the rear window and looked down into the yard. It appeared to be clear but that meant little. There was no one on the fire escape.

He went back to the door, partly closed it and then took out his gun. The clip was half empty and he exchanged it for the spare he carried in the holster pocket.

The apartment bell rang and Marie opened the door. She took one step backward and lifted her hands.

"What ees this?" she cried. "I 'ave done notheeng to you! What do you want?"

"Back up and shut up!"

The voice was a low contralto that lifted the short hairs on the back of Smooth's neck. In the dim light of the hall he could see Gilda Garland moving toward Marie.

There was a gun in her hand and trouble in her eyes. Smooth noticed she had changed from her evening clothes and was wearing a blue worsted tailored outfit. Her blond hair was swept back from her forehead and caught under a small blue felt.

"But what ees it?" asked Marie. "What do you want?"

"Information, please—and I'm not advertising ginger ale," said Gilda. She backed Marie to the kitchen door and motioned toward a chair. "Sit down, forget that trick accent, and tell me who put the finger on Smooth Kyle tonight."

"The finger?"

"You know what I mean, Toots," said Gilda. "Less than an hour ago the word went out that Smooth was worth fifty grand—dead. It didn't mean anything to most of the mob, but it started every crazy hop-head and cokie in town after him. The Groupmen made a try at the Club Yvonne, then the word reached Broadway. Now I'm here to find out who is offering that fifty grand—and you're going to tell me!"

Smooth tried not to breathe. His first impulse had been to open the door and speak to Gilda. But why lead with his neck? It was almost four in the morning. Hardly the hour for a social call. He didn't think Gilda would believe him if he claimed he was merely waiting for a street car. Any other explanation would sound just as foolish. Marie was over six. The chances were even that she could send Gilda merrily on her way with a few words. Then Smooth could leave.

"You've got me wrong, Miss Garland," said Marie quietly. "I don't know who is offering the money. Oh, I could tell you he is called Center but you probably know that already. I could also tell you Smooth is safe and will probably be at his hotel if you call him on the phone. I don't suppose you would believe me, though."

Smooth grinned. It was a nice try, and a fast hint for him to take the fire escape exit while the going was good. Marie was a woman. She knew explanations would not be easy. Not with Gilda on the prod. And she was high tonight—high and hard.

"Listen, toots," said Gilda. "I don't know how long you've been on Broadway, but if you've been around long enough to hear about me, you know

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how I feel about Smooth. You, and Center, and a thousand more like him, mean less to me than Smooth's right ear—even if it is a little bent. Now tell me what you know or I'm apt to forget I'm a lady. Where's Smooth? And who put the finger on him? Talk fast, or—"

"You mean that you will shoot me?"

"Honey, you've just made a real close guess."

SMOOTH turned up the collar of his coat. Gilda's words had dropped the temperature in the apartment close to zero. She was standing with her shoulder against one side of the doorway, her gun was steady and she looked first into the kitchen and then along the hall toward the bedroom door. Not a bad position, but Smooth wondered if she were not being a little careless about the front door. It was still open and from where Gilda stood she couldn't cover it.

"I've told you all I can," said Marie at length. "You won't gain anything by threatening me."

"This isn't a threat," said Gilda coldly. "This is a promise. You've got just one minute, toots. And you can tell your partner it won't be healthy on the fire escape. Some of my friends are in the yard."

"My partner," said Marie.

Gilda pointed toward the cups on the table. "Don't tell me it's an old French custom to use two cups. Think fast, toots—a minute doesn't last long."

"I don't believe you would dare!"

Smooth opened the door and stepped into the hall. "I do, Marie," he said quietly. "She was dropped on her head when she was a little girl and she's been pulling triggers ever since."

"Well, if it isn't Little Boy Blue!" said Gilda. She lowered her gun, half turned to face Smooth and lifted it again. "I suppose you just dropped in to fix a radio—or something?"

"A business call, gorgeous. I work for the Government—remember?"

"How interesting!" said Gilda sweetly. Her smile was cold as the barrel of her gun. "That must keep you quite busy. Do you collect etchings as a hobby?"

"Darling, that had all the earmarks of a left hook to the chin. Be nice, put your gun away and I'll explain everything."

"Save it," said Gilda shortly. "A minute ago I was worried because Center had hung a fifty thousand dollar price tag on your back. Now I think he's a chump. Where you belong, handsome, is in the bargain basement!"

"Ah, how she loves me!" said Smooth. He waved a casual hand to Marie Roubard and started toward the apartment door. "Thanks for the coffee, Marie, and thanks for the information. Gilda and I will probably stage a return bout in Madison Square Garden next month. In the meanwhile, I'm going to catch up with some sleep."

He pushed the door wide and grinned at Gilda. "Going my way, beautiful? I'll be glad to give you a lift."

Gilda tilted the barrel of her gun. She tightened her grip and the gun flared. Plaster showered down from the torn ceiling and spread a white coating over Smooth's hair. He ducked and backed quickly through the doorway. A small, hard circle of steel jammed against his backbone. He stopped and lifted his hands.

"The joint is haunted!" he gasped.

THERE was a low laugh at his shoulder and a voice said: "Sorry, Smooth—I didn't know it was you. I figgered Gilda was havin' trouble."

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The gun left his backbone and Smooth turned. Rags Donovan was standing flatfooted in the outer hall, a gun in his hand and a wide Irish grin on his face. He was wearing green this evening—a double-breasted suit of wool plaid. The cuffs of his suit flared and each held a row of eight tiny buttons. The points of the lapels extended above the heavily padded shoulders and a bright yellow four-in-hand was knotted loosely at the collar of his green silk shirt. The combination was one of the many that had given him his name—Glad Rags Donovan, now shortened to Rags.

Smooth blinked and drew a deep breath. "Just between the two of us," he said quickly, "it might be a good idea to get out of here before Gilda wrecks the place. A dollar gets you twenty I can beat you to the street."

Gilda stepped into the hall and closed the door behind her. She put her gun into her purse and started down the stairs. Smooth followed and Rags brought up the rear. At the lower landing, a door opened and a man looked at them questioningly.

"Did you hear a shot?" he asked.

"Me?" said Rags. "I can't hear nothin', pal. I'm deef."

"Maybe it was a backfire," said Smooth innocently. "I left my plane on the roof with the motor running."

"Oh, don't let it bother you," said Gilda to the startled tenant. She smiled and pointed to the upper landing. "Miss Roubard was repainting an old bomb and it exploded. She's an anarchist, you know. Her real name is Roubarditzkovitch, and she was exiled by the Tsar."

"Are you people crazy?" cried the man.

"Why, of course," said Gilda. "Hadn't you heard?"

She hurried down the stairs and nodded to one of Rags' men who stood in the lower hall. He opened the door and Smooth followed her into the street. Another stood at the foot of the brownstone steps. When Gilda took Smooth's arm and started toward Sixth Avenue, two men on the far side of the street kept pace with them.

"What is it—a convoy?" asked Smooth.

"You don't mind if I keep you alive, do you, handsome?" said Gilda. "I don't know why I take the trouble, but perhaps it's because I'm used to you."

Smooth grinned. "Would you like to hear what Marie told me?"

"No!"

"Would you be surprised to learn she works for France?"

"And you fell for that line?"

"It wasn't a line," said Smooth.

He told Gilda in a few words of his conversation with Marie. Then, talking quickly, he told of his trip to Mitchell Field and his deal with Engel. Gilda listened, shaking her head slowly at times.

"I knew I shouldn't have left you alone," she said at length. "Can't you see you've been framed, Smooth? Don't you realize Center is making you jump through a hoop?"

"How come?"

Gilda's voice was patient. "They've kept you on a merry-go-round ever since you started on this case," she said. "I've been trying to guess the answer and now I think I've got it. It's so simple that even *you* ought to see it."

"Meaning I'm not too smart?"

"Angel, as a detective, you're a wonderful hackman!"

"We'll argue about that tomorrow," said Smooth. "All I want now is the answer."

"I'll give it to you when we get to Lindy's."

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"Why Lindy's? I want some sleep. Tomorrow will be a big day, beautiful."

"We're going to Lindy's" said Gilda firmly. "I want you to have a little talk with Lieutenant Lyons."

"Who the devil is he?"

"Oh, just an army flier. He's due at Mitchell Field at six in the morning and he takes off for the south at seven. He's been waiting half the night to talk to you, Handsome."

"Why?"

"He thought you might like to know the name of his partner on that flight. If you're impatient, I'll tell you now. It's Lieutenant Hodkins!"

Smooth shook his head. "That can't be," he said. "Hodkins doesn't leave until tomorrow. Nadja sent me a note. I got it at the Club Yvonne when I was sitting with Mark Hesson." He dipped into his coat pocket and brought out the sheet of note paper. "Here—read it yourself!"

Gilda's smile was thin. "Poor Nadja Sherene. So her brother is in a concentration camp and she's just a Girl Scout, trying to do her good deed for the day. Why don't you wake up? You've been tossed around like a basketball!"

CHAPTER XXIV

CANDIDATE FOR A HAYRIDE

SMOOTH walked quietly for a time. They had crossed Sixth Avenue and turned north to Fifty-first Street. It was almost four and only an occasional straggler passed them. Taxis still were parked at the curbs but there was little traffic. Rags Donovan walked a few steps behind and his men had spread in a rough semi-circle, keeping pace with Smooth and Gilda. They turned west again toward Broadway.

"Where did you dig up this guy Lyons?" asked Smooth at length.

"That wasn't hard," said Gilda. "I told you I didn't believe Nadja's story when you gave it to me. The more I thought of it, the worse it got. There was no use trying to convince you, so I called McNeary in Washington and asked him to send Lyons to visit me."

"That still doesn't tell me how you knew about Lyons?"

"Oh, grow up! Common sense should tell you Hodkins isn't going to fly an army bomber alone. Not when he's going south for maneuvers. McNeary got the name of Hodkins' observer, located him at Mitchell Field, and told him to meet me at Lindy's. Dave Haley has been there with him for hours."

"I suppose you spilled the whole story to McNeary."

"I should have," said Gilda, "but I gave you a break, handsome. He's coming to New York and talk things over with you. I told him you'd be eating breakfast in Lindy's so you've got about two hours to think up a good excuse."

"Just a pal!" said Smooth disgustedly. "Did you ever stop to think that Nadja might have tried to reach me with a second message?"

Gilda stopped short and stared at Smooth. Her eyebrows went up and she jammed both hands into the pockets of her coat. "Is this the man who used to be of the smartest agents in the Treasury Department?" she said slowly. "Or have I been talking to Gracie Allen?"

"You can't hate a guy for wishing," said Smooth. "And the more I think about it, the more I believe Nadja is on the level. Everything she told me ties in with what I know to be true. I wasn't dreaming when I saw her kill

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that agent at the dictaphone. Her story about the freighter checks with Mark Hesson's. She tipped me about Hodkins and that checked when I went to Mitchell Field. And if you're right about Nadja, how do you explain Engel, the mechanic?

"His brother has been grabbed and he was propositioned by one of Center's men. He was offered twenty grand to hook a bomb onto the ignition of Hodkins' plane. Everything adds up. Even Marie's story about the manufacturers. She doesn't know Nadja is stringing along with me—she thinks Nadja is one of Center's agents and she warned me against her. Put it all together and—"

"It spells hokum!" Gilda finished. "I don't care how Nadja's story checks. Lieutenant Lyons is leaving at seven in the morning. That makes Nadja Sherene a liar! But don't take my word for it, Handsome. Ask him yourself!"

SHE hurried across Broadway, and marched toward the revolving door of the restaurant where the citizens of Times Square gather to exchange gossip and hot air over coffee and food. Actors, song pluggers, musicians, producers—each and every branch of the many trades that center about Broadway sends its representatives to Lindy's.

The faces that look up from the tables are white faces with tired eyes. The voices are tired. Even the gags are tired. As Gilda went past the cashier's desk two girls from a hit show waved hello and motioned to places at their table. Gilda shook her head. A waiter beckoned and pointed toward the back of the room.

Gilda nodded and started toward a table where a man in uniform was talking with Dave Haley.

Smooth noticed that Rags Donovan had not come into the restaurant. He couldn't blame him. Rags might have found Hoover or one of his Department of Justice agents enjoying an early morning meal. Or Sergeant Smith of the Homicide Squad—another man who would have been glad to see Rags.

Smooth shook hands with Lieutenant Lyons when he was introduced by Gilda, nodded to Haley and pulled up a chair. The flier had been cut from the same cloth as Lieutenant Hodkins—trim and capable. He was the sort you would want on your side in an argument. His jaw was good and his eyes were better. Laughing eyes that could go cold quickly. Just now they were filled with amusement at Haley's description of a music publisher who sat at a nearby table.

Gilda used one of her best smiles. "I don't know how to thank you for being so patient," she said. "It must have been a long night for you."

"Not at all," said Lyons. "I've enjoyed every minute of it. Dave has been swell company and I'm free until six in the morning. Or I should say, five. It takes an hour to get to the field.

"And you take off at seven?" said Smooth.

"Yes," said Lyons. "Hodkins and I go south to join the Blacks—the invading forces. There's been some delay but the orders came through late this evening." He grinned and glanced up at the clock above the doorway. "That is, they came through last night. It's after four in the morning now, although you'd never think it to see the crowd in here. Great place, Broadway—wish I could get here more often. Hodkins likes it, too. Both of us came through from the Coast a few months ago, you know."

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Gilda was looking at Smooth, one eyebrow lifted as she tried to hide a smile. There was an "I told you so" expression in her eyes that made Smooth wish he could put her across his knee. Instead, he rested one elbow on the table and ran a hand through his hair. That didn't help. Plaster dust drifted down to the dark table top and Gilda snickered. Smooth tried not to hear it. He turned to the flier.

"Was Hodkins with you when the orders came through?" he asked quietly.

"He might have been," said Lyons. "I know he was going to meet a friend later and he was worried about keeping the appointment. I think he left just after the orders came through. Still, I can't be sure. He might have asked one of the men to phone him, you know."

It was Smooth's time to look at Gilda with one brow up and laughter in his eyes. He stood up, excused himself and walked to the phone booth. He dialed Nadja's number and waited. The phone whirred once, twice, three times—once more and Smooth heard the apartment operator's voice. He asked for Nadja Sherene and wondered how he could get his message past a tapped wire.

"Hello," said Nadja.

"'LO, BABY," said Smooth. He slurred the words, talking as though his voice was thick with liquor. "I losh my wallet. D'you find my wallet? I musha lost my wallet at your house, baby."

"Who on earth is this?" asked Nadja impatiently. She paused and lowered her voice. "Is this Smooth?"

"Shure it ish, baby. Shorry t'bother you but I mush a lef' my wallet at your housh. Ish it still there?"

"Certainly it is," said Nadja. She laughed. "I've been trying to reach you all night. It must have fallen out of your pocket. I found it in one of the chairs."

"Thash fine!" said Smooth. "I'll be right up n'get it."

"Oh, I'm afraid I can't ask you to come here now."

"Why not?"

Nadja laughed again as though she were humoring a man who had been drinking too much. "Well, I have a friend with me now. A very important friend."

"Oh! You mean Lieutenant Hodkinsh?"

"Yes."

"A fine thing!" said Smooth. "Entertainin' a man at thish hour!"

Her voice was reasonable:

"But he's my fiancé, Smooth. And I may not see him again for weeks and weeks. We both expected he would have another day or two in town, but tonight he got orders to leave for the South. That means we won't be able to have lunch together tomorrow."

"A fine thing!" said Smooth again. "Firsh you send me a invitashun for lunch—then you tell me no lunch. What'sa idea, huh?"

"But I tried to reach you, Smooth. I called the Club Yvonne but you weren't there. I've even called your hotel."

"Well, I wan' my wallet! Gotta have my wallet! When can I come an' get my wallet?"

"Now, let me see," said Nadja thoughtfully. Her tone was still that of a woman trying to humor a pest. "Suppose you come here and have breakfast with me. Let's say at about seven o'clock. Or for that matter, you can come a little earlier. Will that do?"

"Thash great!" said Smooth.

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"And you're sure you understand?"

"Yopp!"

"Then I'll expect you sometime between five and seven. We'll have lots of things to talk about. Goodbye, Smooth, dear."

"G'bye."

He dropped the receiver on the hook and rested his head against the wall of the booth. In a few minutes Center would be told that Smooth Kyle was drunk, and that Nadja Sherene was having trouble with him. So much the better.

Nadja had been quick on the uptake. In an apparently innocent conversation she had told him everything he wanted to know. Hodkins had received his orders while he was with her. He would leave at five and fly south at seven. Nadja had received further instructions and would pass them along to Smooth when Hodkins left.

Adding it up, it meant Nadja was still dealing him cards from the top of the deck. No doubt she had tried to reach him at the Club Yvonne. As for the hotel—Smooth could check that quickly. He dialed the number and asked the clerk if there had been a call for him earlier in the night.

"Yes, sir," said the clerk. "Quite a few calls."

"Any from Miss Nadja Sherene?"

"Yes. She left word you were to call her the minute you came in. If you'll wait just a moment I'll read the other calls to you."

"Save them," said Smooth. He hung up and stepped out of the booth. As he walked to the table he saw Gilda watching him. He lifted his thumb and rubbed his nose.

"Nice weather we're having, Lieutenant," he said casually. "I hope you enjoy your flight south. Too bad Gilda brought you all the way to the city, but that's the way blondes are—very eccentric."

Lyons looked puzzled.

Gilda leaned forward. "Never mind the blondes and never mind the weather!" she said sharply. "Are you satisfied Nadja is a phoney?"

"Not exactly," said Smooth. He grinned. "I think she's about the smartest girl I ever met. Very pretty, too."

"And you're still falling for that double-talk of hers?"

"I believe what she told me, if that's what you mean, gorgeous."

GILDA'S hand closed over the sugar bowl. She lifted it suggestively and then put it down in disgust. "I give up," she said quietly. She turned to Dave Haley. "I've done my best with him but he insists upon leading with his chin. Nadja Sherene is walking him into one of the nicest little frameups you've ever seen."

Haley laughed. "I wouldn't be too sure of that, Gilda. Smooth looks as though he could take care of himself. Of course, it's none of my business but from what little I've heard, things seem to be going nicely. I'm just sitting back and waiting for the break. When it comes, I hope you won't forget to give me first crack at it for my column."

"When it comes?" said Gilda quickly. "It's practically in your lap right now! If you've got a pencil handy I'll give you the lead. It goes something like this: Federal agent delivers U. S. Army bomb-sight to European espionage group."

Lieutenant Lyons looked up. The laughter went out of his eyes and he turned to face Smooth. "I don't quite get that, but I don't like the sound of it. Would you mind explaining?"

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"A dream," said Smooth easily. "She's a cute girl but sometimes she gets crazy ideas." He looked quickly at Gilda and his eyes narrowed. "I'm sure this is only her idea of a gag. In fact, I expect her to settle down and act her age. After all, she's old enough not to talk out of turn just because of a little disappointment." He folded his arms on the table and kept his eyes on Gilda. "Speak up, beautiful. Tell Lieutenant Lyons he's got nothing to worry about!"

"Don't give me that!" said Gilda harshly. "I'll say what I please and I'll do as I please. I think you're a chump and I don't intend to let that bomb-sight leave this country."

"You're doing fine," said Smooth. His voice was heavy with sarcasm. "I don't like to interrupt, but has it ever occurred to you that Dave Haley is a newspaperman?"

Haley pushed back his chair. "Deal me out!" he said quickly. "I print news but I don't want any part of this! If you're worried about me, Smooth, I'll bow out and come back when you call me."

"Sit down, Dave!" said Gilda. She turned to Smooth. "You'd be dead if it weren't for Dave Haley! He got the word that someone had put a price on you! He passed it along to me. While you've been bouncing from Nadja's apartment to Marie's kitchen, he's been trying to help me break this case.

"Listen, dope—

"I told you long ago he could be a big help, and I meant it. As for Lieutenant Lyons—he's going to be the man to get killed if you guess wrong. Never mind that hokum about Nadja's brother in a concentration camp! Lieutenant Lyons is going to be flying a plane that's due for a crash. Why shouldn't I deal him in?"

CHAPTER XXV

SAILING ORDERS

THAT tore it! Smooth leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. Something had happened to Gilda Garland. This wasn't the girl who had outsmarted the fastest thinkers in New York. True, he had never quite known what to expect from her. But Gilda had always known enough to keep her mouth shut.

Now she was spilling everything she knew—talking like a jealous little fool. Perhaps the job had been too much for her. Smooth didn't know. He didn't care. He had a bigger job on his hands now. He had to keep Lieutenant Lyons in line!

"Suppose you lower your voice and start from the beginning," he said to Gilda. "You've told half of it—now tell the rest. We'll leave it to Haley and Lyons to decide who's right. Is that fair enough?"

"Suits me," said Haley. "Or if you'd rather, I'll step out and let the three of you argue it."

"Stay where you are," said Gilda. She leaned forward on the table and motioned to the others to do the same.

"Two hours after Smooth went on this case, a foreign agent known as Center tried to have him killed. Then a friend of mine, Mark Hesson, told Smooth he had been threatened by Center—instructed to hold one of his freighters ready to sail on orders from Center. No sooner had Mark passed this along to Smooth than a mob of hopheads grabbed Hesson." She turned to Haley. "You helped then, Dave. Your broadcast made Center turn Hesson loose. I got in touch with some friends, told them to keep an eye on Smooth, and sent some others after the mob that grabbed Hesson. Later

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we learned that Frederick, the head waiter at the Club Yvonne had given orders for the snatch. When my friends tried to take Frederick to their apartment to question him, Center had a crowd of Group men stage a battle in Fifty-second Street. They put Frederick in a hospital to keep him from talking."

"Hold that!" said Smooth. "Frederick didn't work for Center. I told you who he was working for, Gilda."

"And who told you?" laughed Gilda. "Another dame with a fast line. Marie Roubard is one of Center's crowd, and you know it. Still, you take her word when she tells you a bedtime story!"

Smooth shook his head wearily. "Go ahead—have it your way."

Gilda looked at him sharply, then turned toward Haley. "While Smooth and I were at the Club, you introduced Nadja Sherene. She could have kept going but she sat down and made a play for Smooth. He fell for it.

"Later that night Center made another try. Nadja had probably tipped him—or for that matter, *she* may be Center. Anyway, the word was passed to a Group man and he tried to give Smooth the works. The next night Nadja called Smooth and invited him to dinner. The chump accepted and she told him a story that would knock your eye out!"

Lieutenant Lyons glanced at the clock over the door. "This is all very interesting," he said. "But just what has it to do with the bomb-sight? I haven't much time left, you know."

"Oh, Gilda will get around to that in a few hours," said Smooth.

"She'll get around to it right now!" said Gilda sharply. "And while I'm at it, ask yourself why Center didn't try to kill you while you were at Nadja's place. If you don't guess the answer, I'll tell you in a minute."

She turned to Lyons again. "Nadja claimed to be in Center's power. You know—the oldtime melodrama stuff. Corny, but good enough for Smooth Kyle to swallow. She said her brother was in a concentration camp and would be killed if she didn't help Center deliver the bomb-sight. Of course she hated Center and his mob! She was just a poor girl trying to help her brother. When she delivered the sight to Center, he would send a radio message to Europe and her brother would be released. All she wanted Smooth to do was leave Center alone until the message was sent. Then he could grab both Center and the sight."

"Did she tell how the sight would be delivered to Center?" asked Haley.

"OH, of course," said Gilda. "She fed him just enough to keep him going. She told him the sight would be on the plane flown south by Lieutenants Hodkins and Lyons. It was to be transferred to her and she would deliver it to Center aboard a freighter. That tied in with what Mark Hesson had told us, so Smooth fell for it."

"But how do they expect to get the instrument?" asked Lyons. "Certainly, they don't expect Hodkins and me to *hand* it to them!"

"We'll come to that in a minute," said Gilda.

"Do you mind if I ask a question?" said Haley. "I can't understand why Nadja told all this to Smooth. If she is actually trying to get that bomb-sight, why give away the plan?"

"Nice work, Dave," said Smooth. He laughed and turned to Gilda. "Can you think up an answer to that one, beautiful?"

"Very easily," said Gilda. "But have

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you guessed why Center didn't try to have you killed until a few hours ago?"

"Maybe he was resting," said Smooth.

Gilda's laugh was short. She looked at Lieutenant Lyons. "Do you happen to have a map in your pocket?"

"A map?" said Lyons. "Of course not!"

Gilda called the waiter while Smooth rubbed the lobe of his right ear and looked quizzically at Haley. Dave shrugged and looked at Lyons. The flier was equally puzzled and turned to listen while Gilda spoke with the waiter.

"Go outside," she said, "and ask the boys on the hackline to dig up a map of New York State—one that has Long Island on it."

"A map?" said the waiter. He looked at Gilda in surprise.

"Yes—a map! A road-map. One of the hackmen must have a Long Island road map. Hurry!"

The waiter left and Gilda turned to face Dave Haley. "The reason Nadja told all this to Smooth is simple because Center needed another agent. He knew enough not to offer a bribe to an army flier. The only way he could get that bomb-sight off the plane was to bring the plane down.

"In order to do that, he tried to bribe and threaten one of the army mechanics at Mitchell Field. He wanted a man named Edward Engel to put a time-bomb on the plane motor. It was set to tear out the ignition five minutes after the takeoff. But Center had underestimated the type of men in the army. He had grabbed Engel's brother and threatened to kill him if the mechanic didn't play ball. He'd also offered Engel twenty thousand dollars. But Engel told him to go to Hell on both counts."

"I'm glad to hear that," said Lyons slowly. "I'll report it to the commanding officer. Men like Engel ought to get some of the medals that go to the men who fly. He's a soldier, that man!"

"I'll add my two-cents worth," said Haley. "I know a few people in the War Department. Maybe we can get him a chance to earn a commission." He turned to Gilda. "But that still doesn't explain why Nadja told Smooth all this."

"Why doesn't it?" said Gilda. "Center was stuck. He had to get that bomb attached to the motor before the plane took off. When Engel refused, Center gave instructions to Nadja. She followed them and told this story to Smooth. He thought he had Center cold—that he would let the plane come down, have the sight removed and passed along to Center on the *Malay Princess*. He even had the name of the freighter from Mark Hesson. Everything was perfect—and then he was allowed to discover the whole deal was off because of Engel."

"I still don't understand," said Haley. "What could Smooth do about it?"

"JUST what he did! He sold Engel a bill of goods—told him he would be serving his government if he put that bomb on the plane. In other words, he walked right into the trap Center had set for him! And that's the reason he wasn't killed at Nadja's apartment—they waited until he had done their work for them and then put a price on him!"

Both men looked quickly at Smooth. There was unbelief in Haley's eyes. Lyons looked as though he would like to swing a fast right. Smooth grinned and rested his elbows on the table.

"Let's have the rest of it, beautiful,"

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he said quietly. "So far, so good."

The waiter had returned with two road maps. He put them on the table and Gilda thanked him. She opened one that showed lower New York and Long Island, part of New Jersey and the coast line. She pointed to the square that marked Mitchell Field and motioned to Lieutenant Lyons.

"If you and Hodkins leave there at seven," she said, "how far would you get in exactly five minutes?"

Lyons took a pencil from his pocket and leaned over the map. "Allowing time for the takeoff," he said, "we would cover a little less than twenty miles in five minutes. We don't push the ships too hard immediately after the takeoff."

"And where would that place you?" asked Gilda.

"Oh, five or six miles off Rockaway, I should judge," said Lyons. He checked off a spot in the section marked Atlantic Ocean. "We'll fly about two-twenty—that's southwesterly to Lakehurst, and then continue on to South Carolina."

"Can you put it into English?" asked Gilda.

Lyons laughed. "Two-twenty is the compass course, and Lakehurst is a government flying field in New Jersey. We leave Mitchell Field and fly approximately southwest, across Lakehurst and on to South Carolina where we join the Black Forces."

"Will there be other planes with you?"

"Not on this trip. It's the preliminary part of a maneuver and the planes take off at different times."

"Suppose your motor cut out at that point," said Gilda. "What would you do?"

"That depends upon our altitude," said Lyons. "Hodkins will be at the controls and I imagine he would go into a long glide and try to reach either Rockaway Point or Sandy Hook."

"And if you don't reach either?"

"We sit down on the ocean."

"Would the plane sink immediately?"

"Oh, no! Not for quite some time. We'd only be carrying a light load of gas."

Gilda turned to Smooth. "Are you still with us, handsome?"

"I'm miles ahead of you," said Smooth. He leaned forward and put his finger on the map. "The *Malay Princess* is anchored in the Upper Bay. That's a little over fifteen miles from the place Lieutenant Lyons marked on the map. Call it twenty to be safe. She's good for about fifteen knots an hour or thereabouts, and if she leaves the anchorage between five and six, she'll be somewhere near the spot where the plane lands."

He moved his finger on the map and nodded to Lyons. "This spot is where one of the Marondale tugs is waiting for an order to put out to sea. She can do better than twenty knots and needs about the same amount of time to get from her dock in Furman Street, Brooklyn, to the place where the plane lands."

"Who ordered the tug?" asked Haley.

"Mark Hesson did," said Smooth. "If Gilda doesn't know why, I'll do the guessing."

"Go right ahead, wonderful," said Gilda. "Lord knows, you ought to be be able to guess right just *once!*"

"The tug," said Smooth, "is equipped with a strong hoist. It will take time to get the bomb-sight off the plane and the tug will hook on, apparently as a rescue job. When the bomb-

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sight is removed the tug will pull alongside the *Malay Princess* and deliver it. Very simple, I'd call it."

He sat back, relaxed.

"Not quite so simple," said Haley. "If this story is on the level it means the captain and crew of the tug are working for Center. The same holds true with the officers and crew of the *Malay Princess*. And if the freighter carries a gun, it means the English gun crew has sold out, too! For my part—I simply don't believe it!"

"I don't ask you to believe it," said Smooth quietly. "But I'm one of those chumps who believes almost everything. I'm willing to believe a guy like Center can handle the last half of this setup just as easily as he's handled the first part." He turned to the flier. "How about you, Lyons? Do you go with me?"

Lyons' grin was wry. "I'm afraid all of this is beyond me," he said, "I'm not in the espionage service, thank the Lord. But I am a flier. I don't know what would happen if we went through with this crazy plan, but I have no intention of trying it. When I get to Mitchell Field I'll report the whole thing and you can be damn sure there will be nothing wrong with the ignition when we take off!"

SMOOTH closed his eyes. His head was leaping and bright sparks were flashing before him in spite of the tightly shut lids. He drew three deep breaths and opened his eyes to look at Gilda.

"Are you satisfied, angel?" he asked. "First you prove I'm a fool. Then you prove I'm not a fool. Then you tell exactly how we can catch the man who has cost the lives of dozens of agents. And then, quite sweetly, you toss the whole thing into the alley!"

"Are you convinced Nadja was making an idiot of you?" she asked.

"No!" snapped Smooth. "She didn't know about Engel. They were ready to drop the whole plan earlier tonight. I kept it going and now our bright young aviator wants to spoil it again!"

Lyons pushed back his chair. He stood up and faced Smooth. "I don't like your tone and I don't like being called a bright young aviator," he said. "You look as though you've had a hard night and I'm willing to let it go at that. But I'm leaving before one of us gets a poke on the nose!"

"Sit down!" said Smooth evenly. "I'm sorry I spoke out of turn. I don't like to chuck my weight around. But it just happens that I'm the boss right now! The man I'm after is more important than you and your plane and a thousand more like them. You're supposed to be a soldier, Lyon.

"Well, soldier, let me tell you there's a war going on in this country that would make Europe's affair look small. I'm in it, and so are you! I take chances, and you're going to do the same. If you mess up this deal, I'll have you kicked out of the army if it's the last thing on earth I do. And when you're out, I hope you come looking for me, feller!"

Lyons took a step forward and Gilda jumped to her feet. She put her hands on the flier's arm. "Easy, Lieutenant!" she said. "I hate to admit it, but I'm afraid he isn't bluffing. This isn't the first time I've heard him make a promise. Usually it's a promise to meet someone with a gun, and he always comes through." She pulled up the flier's chair and pushed him into it. "Let's talk this over and see if we can't find a sensible way out for all of us."

A waiter had come toward the table

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and he stood a few paces away, looking first at Gilda and then at Smooth as though he were wondering when the fireworks would start. When Lyons sat down and Gilda seated herself beside him, the waiter touched Smooth on the shoulder.

"A phone call for you, Mr. Kyle," he said quietly. "The gentleman has been calling all evening. He says it is important."

"Thanks," said Smooth. He stood up and faced the group at the table. "Stay put, all of you. We'll settle this argument once and for all when I come back!"

"Oh, stop growling and take your call," said Gilda.

"Uhuh."

Smooth walked to the phone booth and closed the door. It had been almost a twenty-hour day and his legs were ready to crumple. So was his head. Eight hours between the sheets would be worth a month's pay, but the way things were shaping up it seemed that bed was something he could think about but never reach.

HE LIFTED the receiver and put it to his ear. "Yeah," he said wearily. "Kyle talking. What's wrong now?"

"You are," said an angry voice. "This is Mark Hesson. Where the hell have you been all night?"

"It's your nickel," said Smooth. "You can do the guessing. Me—I'm just bouncing around in a dream."

"Then snap out of it," said Hesson. "I've called you at your hotel—at Gilda's place—everywhere. I've been trying to reach you ever since two o'clock."

"Why?"

"Gray called."

"Who?" said Smooth stupidly. "What Gray?"

"Thomas Gray, you ape! The man who told me to hold the *Malay Princess* at her anchorage! The man who told me to charter a sea-going tug!"

Smooth blinked and shook his head. "Check!" he said. "Let's have it!"

"Gray told me to give the *Malay Princess* sailing orders. She leaves at five-thirty and goes without a pilot."

"A pilot?" said Smooth. "What the—"

"Just one more headache for me," said Hesson. "There's no law that makes a ship take a pilot but it kills the insurance if she doesn't. If anything happens to the *Malay Princess* in the harbor, I'm stuck for the bill."

"What else did he tell you?"

"He wants the tug to leave Furman Street at the same time and steam at full speed to the Municipal Pier at Rockaway Point."

"And that's all?"

"Isn't that enough?" cried Hesson.

"Just about," said Smooth. "Did you give the orders yet?"

Hesson cursed for thirty seconds before he answered. "Look, Smooth—you told me to get in touch with you before I released the *Malay Princess!* I told you I would, and now I've done it. But if I don't get that order off within ten minutes, Gray will be on his way to the district attorney's office. He's no fool. He can see the freighter from the Brooklyn waterfront! If the anchor doesn't come up on time—I'm sunk!"

"Then what are you waiting for?" yelled Smooth. "Go ahead! Give the order! Then go to bed, feller—I wish t'hell I could!"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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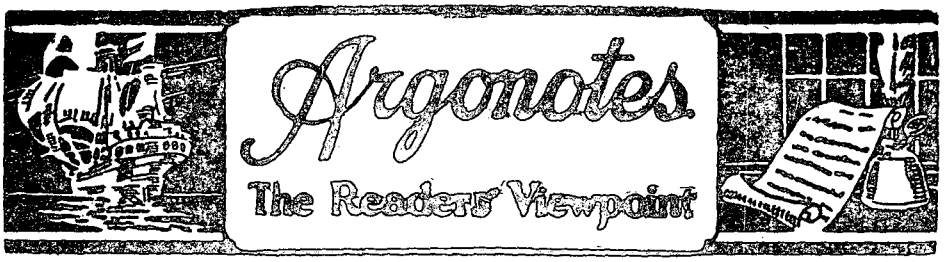

TWO worries constantly harry an editor: Is he keeping his old readers? Is he winning new ones? This week, for the first time in our experience, the answers to both of those disturbing questions arrived in the same mailbag. For a while afterward we felt curiously light-headed and unreal, because there suddenly didn't seem to be anything to worry about. (That didn't last, of course.)

Now here are readers Alpha and Omega.

J. S. McCLELLAND

I have read ARGOSY for fifty years or so, it seems to me. I started with its early issues and have missed few since. Your magazine at present is at its best, although I deplore your so-called fantastic novels. They have neither rhyme nor reason.

"Tarzan in Pelu" (how do you spell it?) was your best. Your most entertaining author, W. C. Tuttle, is sadly missed by me.

May I commend your "Then I'll Remember" by C. M. Warren? It is your best story of recent date. Sorry to have failed to read his other ones. Your Roscoe stories are all good. I miss Gardner and MacIsaac but most of all—Tuttle. His name on a magazine sells it to me. MASONTOWN, PA.

DAN KELLEKER

Being a youthful reader, and having read

UNFAITHFUL BY COMMAND!

"I married a Storm Trooper! . . . But I never dreamed what depths of horror that could mean till I was trapped in Nazi Germany; far from all who loved me. They married us by unholy pagan rites . . . *they told me it was my duty to betray my husband . . . and my country. They submitted me to every humiliation a woman can know.* But I could not escape . . . *I had to go forward to my destiny."*

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your mag for only a year, I can name only twelve stories that I think are the best so far as I have read. I think ARGOSY is the best all-around book I have read. Here are my selections:

1. River Rogues.
2. Men With No Master.
3. Remember Tomorrow.
4. Loot Lies Deep.
5. Rawhide Road.
6. Rakehelly Ride.
7. Archers to the Front.
8. Lords of Creation.
9. Makers of Shadows.
10. Minions of Mars.
11. The Devil's Diary.
12. Seal of Treason.

DAYTONA BEACH, FLA.

OUR correspondent below is anxiously in search of an old ARGOSY serial, called, he says, "Swordsmen of Mars." We haven't been able to locate the story in our back files, and so if any of you veteran readers can remember when it appeared, would you let us know?

WILLIAM HASTINGS

About ten years ago a story called "Swordsmen of Mars" appeared in ARGOSY. The picture on the cover was of a man dressed in a sort of turban, a leather apron like a loin-cloth, and soft leather boots. In his right hand he held a two-edged sword, while his left hand rested on a creature with long legs and a body built along the lines of an alligator. The creature was called a Dayak.

The story dealt with a young American adventurer who was drugged by a scientist. When the young man awoke, the scientist told him that he had been in mental communication with Mars; the scientist proposed that the hero exchange places with a young Martian named Reb Shek Tekkor.

The exchange was made by transposing the minds of the earth man and the Martian. Each awoke in a strange world and had a series of strange and delightful adventures. The earth man fell in love with two girls on Mars, one a princess and the other a swamp girl. Finally, both the Martian and the earth man decided to stay on the planet of his adoption.

I suggest you print my letter and ask some of your older readers to write in, giving the date when the story began in ARGOSY or the date of any issue in which the serial appeared. It is important that I get this information, otherwise I would not bother you.

CINCINNATI, OHIO.

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THOMAS W. DUNCAN

DETOUR, MR. DARWIN

You know Dave McNally, the animal man. Well, the good people of Cottonsville did not; but they were to learn soon that McNally plus monkeys equals mayhem. While the citizens of Cottonsville hid in ashcans and shuddered under beds, a legion of antic apes took over the town and Dave McNally did solo dances on Main Street. A hilarious novelet by

RICHARD WORMSER

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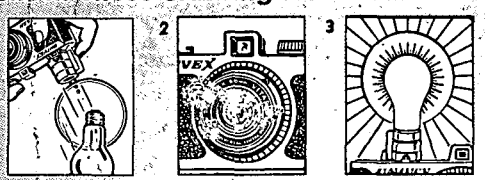

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